AL·No23
508

GET ON WITH THE WOOING

BY

F. E. PENNY

AUTHOR OF "THE TWO BRIDES," ETC.

1856
3/70

BAIRAGARH B. O. Rs. LIBRAR
BRANCH NORTH
No. of BOOK. 11-33

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON

THE LON[illegible] BOOK CO.

[illegible]

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN FOR HODDER AND STOUGHTON, LTD
BY BILLING AND SONS, LTD., GUILDFORD AND ESHER.

Al. No-46
COMPUTRIZED

CONTENTS

CHAPT PAGE
I. ANTED, A JOB - - - - 7
II. IE OWNER F THE PEARLS - - - 20
III. ON LOSES HIS BILLET - - - - 28
IV. N THE SOUTH INDIAN HILLS - - - 50
V. PYTHON ON THE PATH - - - 60
VI. HE INSPECTOR OF POLICE TO THE RESCUE - 67
VII. ROGUE ELEPHANT - - - - 74
VIII. A MURDERER AT LARGE - - - 85
IX. AN UNEXPECTED MEETING - - - 93
X. THE MONKEYS' VALLEY - - - - 106
XI. CASSIM, THE BUTLER - - - - 115
XII. ZOE GOSSIPS - - - - - 124
XIII. DON SHOWS ESTELLE THE SOUTHERN CROSS - 135
XI A CHANGE OF RULERS IN A JUNGLE TRIBE - 146
X DON IS NOT AMENABLE - - - 159
X. MR. JAMES SMITH APPEARS - - - 171
XVII. UNCLE JAMES IS NOT PLEASED - - - 180
XVIII. THE GIPSY AND HIS FIREWOOD - - 189
XIX. THE MURDERER UNMASKED - - - 196
XX. ESTELLE GOES IN SEARCH OF DON - - 205
XXI. ESTELLE EXPLORES THE JUNGLE - - 213
XXII. DON AND HIS UNCLE ARE PERTURBED - - 219

CHAPTER PAGE
XXIII. ESTELLE IS MISSING - - - - 226
XXIV. THE PEARLS ARE ALSO MISSING - - 233
XXV. THE GIPSY ON THE TRAIL - - - 240
XXVI. THE THIEF - - - - - 254
XXVII. THE PEARLS ARE AGAIN STOLEN - - 262
XXVIII. THE ROGUE ELEPHANT INTERVENES - - 270
XXIX. THE GIPSY IS QUESTIONED - - - 279
XXX. THE PEARLS CHANGE HANDS YET AGAIN - 286
XXXI. LOVE AND THE PEARLS RETURN - - 291
XXXII. NAHGOO IS SATISFIED. ALSO UNCLE JAMES - 302

1856

dec. 1956

DONALD OAKLEY was "axed" out of the Navy for no fault of his own. Reduction was the order of the day and he had to go. His mother was still alive, living on an annuity that provided her with sufficient for her own needs. She gave him a warm welcome; but it did not take him long to discover that what was enough for one in his mother's case was not enough for two.

Don, as she called him, hated having to come back to his mother like an expelled schoolboy. He was thirty years of age and had saved a little money, a very little, for the British Navy is not a munificent paymaster.

After making enquiries in various directions without success, he decided to advertise.

"Ex-naval officer wants employment. Willing to go anywhere and do anything."

He had no replies; and what was more, he found half a dozen advertisements of the same nature as his own in the column. The applications for employment were differently worded, but they all asked for the same thing. One of the advertisers said—"Knows all about horses and can ride." Another—"Can drive a car and do running repairs." A third

—"Ready to travel. Could act as courier to lady or gentleman."

Mrs. Oakley had a brother whose name was James Smith. He was a bachelor and his sister was his only relative. He had put together a nice little fortune in supplying the Army with some of the ironmongery required for the needs of active service. He heard from Mrs. Oakley of Don's return and made a point of calling upon her as soon as possible to discuss ways and means. It was impossible for Don to remain for any length of time under his mother's roof.

"Well, Mary, what are you going to do with that boy of yours?" he asked as soon as they had exchanged greetings. "He's out of a job, I hear."

"Through no fault of his," she retorted, up in arms at once.

"Quite so, but that doesn't alter the fact of unemployment."

At this juncture Donald entered the room. He had heard his uncle arrive and had a shrewd guess as to the reason of his visit. He was attached to the bluff old City merchant and liked him in spite of his downright way of speaking. He was not going to allow him to worry his mother with a lot of questions which he, Don, could best answer himself. He gave his version of his dilemma. His uncle listened with interest.

"What have you done so far?"

Don told him of the enquiries he had made and his applications personally and by letter.

"They all seem full up. Kind enough and sympathetic, but they don't want me and there it is!"

"Have you advertised?"

"Yes, for three days running, and I suppose I had better go on with it. Here's the advertisement." He handed the newspaper to his uncle.

"H'm, that's all right as far as it goes. Your ad. simply says that you are ready and willing to work. That fact should go without saying. Your application is incomplete. You haven't mentioned what you can do."

"Anything——" he began.

"Would you be of any use in a tea-merchant's warehouse? Could you grade tea?"

"I'm afraid I don't know much about tea, except making it to drink."

His uncle laughed as he replied:

"One for each person and one for the pot, eh? That wouldn't be of much use in the Lane. Have you any knowledge, expert, of course, about buying saucepans and tea-dixies and oil-stoves and——"

"Never had anything to do with stocking—er—ironmonger's shops," replied Don.

"Have you had any experience in office work? Keeping books, double entry and so forth?"

"None, I'm sorry to say."

"Do you know shorthand?"

"No."

"Can you use a typewriter?"

"Never had one in my life."

"Have you any knowledge of store-keeping, invoicing, tare and tret——?"

"Don't think I ever came across such things in the Navy—at least not in my department."

"Well, Don, I don't want to be disagreeable, and I should like to help you if I could—but——"

His uncle paused and Don remained silent. He was not anxious to get work through his uncle's good offices. It was too much like charity. Pride came in the way. He wanted to be independent and able to say that he had secured something off his own bat that would keep him respectably. James Smith continued:

"I haven't a billet to offer you because you are not qualified to take anything that is within my reach. If you have to begin at the bottom of the ladder among the learning boys you had better start in the office of some stranger; someone I know nothing about."

"I'm quite ready to do anything if the pay is good."

"Learning your work with boys of sixteen and seventeen is not pleasant for a man who is double their age. Nor does it bring in much money."

"Still it may have to be done," replied Don doggedly.

His uncle glanced at him, wondering if he knew all that such a course involved and if he could "stick it." His opinion of Don was rising. He was inclined to think that the naval authorities were not looking after their own interests in dispensing with the services of such men. Donald was no fool, whether ignorant or experienced.

"Ah, well! Supposing you repeat your advertisement. You say that you haven't had a single reply——"

"Not one."

"But, Don! You had a dozen letters this morning by post," interposed Mrs. Oakley.

"Every one of them touts, offering me partnerships, or to teach me an infallible method of making my fortune on consideration of a premium. Ready to take any sum from a hundred and fifty pounds to a thousand. Nothing doing."

"Sharks!" exclaimed Smith angrily. "Let me suggest that you repeat your advertisement with the words, 'Ready to learn as well as ready to work. Indoors and out-of-doors. Handiness acquired through naval training.' You say you don't mind what it is?"

"No, I am prepared to stand by my advertisement."

His uncle had the sense not to offer him money. He regretted that he could not put his nephew in the way of employment, but without qualifications it was impossible to find him a billet in the City. Men were not prepared to give something for nothing and to pay a man's wages when they could get a boy to do the work. Willingness was a fine asset, but in Smith's opinion it was not sufficient qualification to procure employment.

Don added the words suggested and ordered three more insertions. On the second day of the appearance of the advertisement in its altered form he received a letter asking him if he was willing to act as "valet, footman, chauffeur, and companion"—"What a mixture!" said Don to himself as he read the letter—"to an elderly gentleman who was an invalid. Salary five pounds a week with board and lodging." It was signed E. Talbot.

A couple of hours later he was knocking at the door of a house near Stanhope Gardens.

He was shown in by a smart middle-aged parlourmaid, who opened the door of the library with the announcement:

"A gentleman, Mr. Donald Oakley, to see you, miss, about your letter in reply to the advertisement."

A tall girl rose from her seat at a writing table and walked towards him, meeting him near the door. The maid departed, closing the door after her.

"Mrs. Talbot?" said Donald, adding after a slight hesitation, "Madam."

"Miss Talbot," she replied, looking him up and down as she might have run her eye over a horse. Yet the action as she did it was not impolite. "In your advertisement you say that you are willing to do anything." She took up the paper from the table and refreshed her memory by glancing at it again. "I want someone who will attend upon my father, an invalid, whose brain is beginning to fail. It will involve your acting in all the offices I mentioned in my letter."

He expressed his readiness to do his best.

"Are you good-tempered and of an even disposition?"

"I hope so."

"He is irritable—and has a fine command of language. Can you stand—fire?"

"Having been one of my country's defenders I may claim that I can."

"You say that you are ready to learn. You will have a great deal to learn one way and another if you take up this billet."

While they talked, still standing near the door, he had time to study his questioner. She put six queries to his one, asking if he could do without the usual day out.

He noted that she had regular features, a finely shaped head, steady eyes and a firm mouth. Her features indicated determination and self-reliance. Her dress seemed well-chosen to suit her figure, which had lost its girlishness and had filled out. But he was not good at noting the details of a woman's toilet. If she "looked trim and neat" it was all he asked for.

An object that caught his eye and riveted his attention was a magnificent pearl necklace that she wore. It was the only ornament displayed. If the pearls were real—and he had no reason to doubt it—they were worth a large sum of money.

At the end of twenty minutes the two had come to terms. Don felt that in his present necessity it was too well-paid a billet to turn down. His board and lodging and five pounds a week were not to be picked up every day considering that no previous training was demanded. Whatever his duties were to be, he was to learn them, which meant that they could not be difficult. He would be able to save something out of his salary, and with what he had already he would be able to go out to the colonies or to India later on. He had a hankering after tea-planting on the Indian hills or in Ceylon. Perhaps his uncle might be able to help him to this if he mugged up the subject and learned something of the language. He would probably have some spare time in which he could study.

"Before we conclude this arrangement I should like you to see my father," said Estelle Talbot. "Come this way."

She walked quickly out of the room and led him down to the end of the passage. Without knocking she opened a door. In the middle of the room sat a small, elderly man in a wheeled chair. He had been disabled by a stroke of paralysis.

"Hallo, Estelle!" he cried at sight of her.

"Where's that —— idiot, William? Has he left the house? Who gave him leave to go out?" His eyes fell on Don. Without waiting for an answer to his string of questions he continued volubly: "Who have you got there? Some prize idiot, I can see. A greater fool than William." He glared fiercely at Don. Then he burst into discordant laughter, painful to hear. "Ah! I can guess! It's your latest lover. Does he know how to make love? He'll find you a soft armful. But, —— him! has he got any money? I sent away the last because he hadn't a penny!"

Well, indeed, thought Don, might his daughter warn him that her father's brain was failing! He kept silent though his ears tingled and his colour deepened. Estelle was watching him closely. She noted the rising of his colour as soon as the old man became offensive on her account.

"Steady on!" she warned him in a low voice. "You said that you could stand fire."

He breathed deeply and closed his lips. The torrent of abuse continued.

"All right, dad; that's all right. William has gone to another situation. I have found someone to take his place."

"What? That fool! He's no good!"

"Oh yes, he is! Can we do anything for you before we go?"

"Yes; shove my chair so that the sun doesn't catch me as I sit. And alter the blind of the other window; and give me a glass of soda-water and milk—and where's *The Times*?"

Swear words were freely interspersed in his requests. They were directed impartially against them both. After these wants had been attended to and several others that were trivial and obviously invented to detain them they managed to escape. As Estelle closed the door of her father's room he was shouting abuse of William.

"This is my father's bedroom. It is easy to wheel him from one to the other and convenient to have him on the ground floor. William left us suddenly. He couldn't stand fire. Well? After your experience so far—I tell you frankly that there may be worse to come—will you accept the post?"

He thought he detected a note of anxiety in that last question. It appealed to him and unconsciously helped him to come to a decision.

"Yes, I shall be glad to accept the billet," he replied slowly.

"We will make it a weekly engagement."

"As you please—madam."

"It will be best in case you find him intolerable as William did."

"Your last man left you at a moment's notice?"

"My father threw a glass of soda-water and milk over him. He left the room and the house without even waiting for his wages. Poor old dad! He doesn't know what he is doing nor what he is saying."

Unknown to herself she had softened and lost some of her stiffness.

"I shall not follow William's example. It is not in accordance with my practice to forsake anyone in difficulties."

"Thank you, but I must ask you to leave me out of the question and forget my existence."

Her manner changed and he was reminded that she had not forgotten the fact that they were mistress and servant. While they had been acting together in the sick room and their ears were tingling with the old man's abuse she seemed to unbend. But at his words, implying solicitation for her comfort, she resumed her original coldness and showed her anxiety to keep him in the place he was choosing for himself. Between father and daughter he could foresee that his path bristled with difficulties of all sorts. So it was to be a weekly engagement. This meant that she could give him notice to go on the spur of the moment if he did not please her.

"Can you drive a car?"

"Yes." He named the make that he had been accustomed to drive—when he could afford to keep one.

"Ours is the same make. You will have to drive us out every morning."

"I am quite ready to do so." He forgot to add "madam."

"When can you come?"

"At once if necessary."

"You see that I am alone except for the servants. They are all women. The parlourmaid who showed you in is an old servant. She has been with us many years and helps when it is necessary."

"Shall I come this evening?"

"If you can make it convenient to do so I shall be glad," she said, a little warmth creeping back into her tone.

"I will be here at six."

"Thanks. You will be able to undress him and get him to bed."

"Do I sleep near him?"

"No, a night nurse comes in at eight. What is your name? You advertised under the name of Donald Oakley."

"That is my name."

"Then I shall call you Oakley, of course. This is Saturday, the day on which your wages will be due. Have you a card?"

He took out his card case and was about to present her with his calling card when she stopped him.

"I mean your domestic-service card which I shall have to stamp. If you haven't one, you can get it at the post office. I think that is all I have to say. Good-morning, Oakley."

Estelle went into the library and rang the bell. The parlourmaid showed him out. Again the maid gave him a scrutinising glance.

"Are you joining us?" she asked.

"Yes, this evening in time to help Mr. Talbot to bed."

"Thank God!" she said, and it came from the bottom of her heart.

It was not until he was halfway home that he remembered that Miss Talbot did not ask him for any reference. And he had forgotten that some guarantee might be needed of his good faith before he was taken into the house. He had not provided himself with one. The only name he could give would be his uncle's. If this evening on his arrival she demanded a reference he would have James Smith's name and address ready with his phone number. She could satisfy herself at once while he stood in the hall and waited.

It was a strange position in which he found himself. As far as the irascible old man was concerned he was to act as a servant. With regard to the parlourmaid he was to be an equal. What would be the attitude of the mistress of the house? It would depend on her and her alone whether he stayed.

Punctually on the stroke of six Don arrived with his suitcase. No questions as to a testimonial were asked. He was shown into a small bedroom at the top of the house. It had every appearance of being comfortable. Had he known it, Miss Talbot, having taken his measure, was quite content with her own judgment of his character. That he was a gentleman by birth and education she was convinced. In her dire necessity she could not wait to make enquiries. She had been put to the utmost inconvenience by the abrupt departure of William, who had come with four years of good character. He had failed her miserably. She was not going to depend on testimonials. She meant to trust to her own observation, and she had no doubt but that Oakley would suit as an attendant on her father—if he could put up with her poor old dad's lamentable failings.

Don spent only a short time taking possession of his new quarters. He changed his shoes and descended the stairs. Miss Talbot met him in the hall outside her father's room.

"Will you go down to the kitchen and ask for Mr. Talbot's tray? There will be soup, some fish and game, with fruit and pudding to follow. The soup and fish will be ready. You can go down again for the other courses."

This was his first act as a footman. He was relieved that no mention of livery had been made. The cook accepted his presence in that capacity. Eliza, the parlourmaid, was there.

"I am coming with you to show you how things should be done. To-morrow you will be able to manage by yourself," she said.

The routine went like clockwork. All that was required in the invalid's room—glass, silver, china, and table linen—was to be found in a cupboard at the end of the hall. Eliza laid the table as quickly as she could. She never spent a minute more than was necessary with her master. She had always disliked him, and now she hated the very sight of him. Being a simple-minded, God-fearing woman, his language made her blood run cold.

"When the master has finished, pack the tray and put it on the table in the hall. The housemaid will come and fetch it."

The dinner, which Mr. Talbot took alone, began in dead silence. Estelle was present directing Don in his duties. "Willing to learn," said his advertisement. He had a good deal to learn. To be waited on by a steward was one thing. To wait on others was quite another.

"Estelle, another glass of wine," cried Mr. Talbot suddenly.

"You have had your allowance, dad. No more to-night."

He broke out into violent abuse. She took no notice of his commands nor his vituperation. He turned to Don, who was busy removing the plates and glasses.

"Here! I say, William, or whatever your —— name is, go and get me my coffee. If this —— daughter of mine won't let me have any more wine, I'll have my coffee; a big cup, tell the old beast of a cook. I'll give her notice to-morrow!"

Don went down to the kitchen, carrying a tray of used things to save the parlourmaid. He found the coffee ready.

"Mr. Talbot asked for a large cup."

"He always asks for a large cup, but that is what he gets. It is by the doctor's orders. Poor old master!"

He returned and put the cup down by Mr. Talbot's side. The old man shot a glance at his new attendant as if he was considering whether he might venture to complain about the size of the cup of coffee. He remained silent, but he was annoyed, and the annoyance rankled.

The coffee was finished and a cigarette smoked. Eliza came forward carrying the night suit and a can of hot water. Mr. Talbot was wheeled into the bedroom. He was supposed to be ready for bed by the time the night nurse took up his duties at eight in the evening.

Eliza was greeted with some choice epithets, which she received in grim silence. She hung the night suit over the back of a chair and put the can of water on the washstand. In the middle of the abuse Eliza left the room. The eyes of the old invalid twinkled with mischief.

"She can't stand it. I can clear off that old hag in five minutes."

He sniggered and giggled. Don took no notice, but continued his valeting duties. The old man continued:

"I used to see how long it took to swear that last fellow out of the room. Eleven minutes was the longest time he ever stood it."

Again he sniggered over his triumph. He offered no objection to be washed and prepared for the night. If only he could have been silent, Don would have found his duties light and not unpleasant. When Mr. Talbot was ready for bed he called for his daughter.

"Estelle! Estelle!"

She came at once. Don thought that she had been waiting for the summons.

"Come in, girl, come and read to me or I shall never get to sleep. Where's that book about the African lions? Let's have another chapter. Don't stand there making sheep's eyes at that young fellow."

She had seated herself and taken up the book to find the place where she left off the evening before. The old man's remarks grew more personal and lurid. Suddenly she found the new valet in front of her.

"Madam, will you kindly leave the room?" he said.

Estelle rose. A note of command struck her ear. She did not like it. Her father might say what he chose and give her his orders, but she was not going to take them from anyone else.

"I must read to him first."

"Later you may be able to do so when he is quieter and less excited. You must go, please."

"I am not inclined to leave the room. If you think that I care two straws about what he says you are mistaken."

"That is not the question. If you won't go, I must."

"You! What has all this got to do with you?"

"I have never allowed a man to insult a woman in my presence. Even though your father is infirm and ill, I will not stay to hear him heaping insult on you."

"But if I don't object?"

"I object," said Don, with difficulty hiding the indignation that was glowing within him. "I will go myself. After you have finished your reading I will come back till the night nurse arrives. I have no wish to shirk any of my duties."

She knew he was right, although she did not choose to acknowledge it. She left the room as he had requested. Her father called after her:

"Estelle! You haven't read to me! Come back at once. You——"

Don was by his side instantly.

"That will do, sir. Can't you see that you have driven Miss Talbot out of the room by your filthy language."

"Filthy language! What the —— do you mean? You ——!"

"What I say," said Don quietly. Now that Estelle was out of hearing the bad language ceased to irritate him. "No use calling to her. She will not be coming back this evening. I will read to you."

Mr. Talbot drew a deep breath or two and relapsed into silence.

"I wish Estelle would come," he said presently in a voice that shook. He was not far off tears.

"Another evening, perhaps, sir, if you will be civil."

Ten minutes later Eliza entered, bringing the hot-water bottle, which she placed in the bed. Her appearance was the signal for another outburst. Don strode up to her.

"Thanks for the hot bottle. Will you please go, Eliza? Mr. Talbot's language is not fit for your ears."

He spoke sufficiently loud for his words to reach the old man. The maid glanced at the invalid.

"I'm used to it, Mr. Oakley."

"A matter for regret. Please go. Allow me."

He opened the door for her as if she was a duchess, Eliza said, describing the scene afterwards in the servants' hall.

Acc. No:
1856

At eight o'clock he was relieved. The two hours he had been on duty had seemed like twelve.

The next morning the car was brought from the garage at half-past ten. Don took his seat, started the car, and drove off without waiting for instructions. When he came back ten minutes later Mr. Talbot was in his carrying chair and his daughter was standing behind him.

"Where have you been, Oakley?" she asked.

"To try the car—madam." The honorific stuck in his throat. "It is quite all right; the same make as one I have driven before, but larger."

"It was built specially for my father," she condescended to inform him. "You see that it is half an ambulance. I sit by the side of the driver, and I can communicate with my father through a door behind me. He is more comfortable if he has the whole of the back seat to himself."

Eliza and the housemaid, assisted by Don, helped Mr. Talbot into the car. Estelle took her seat by the chauffeur. At her direction they went into the Park and drove twice round. Don had a feeling that she was taking his measure as a driver, trusting again entirely to her own judgment and asking for no other opinion.

They turned out of Lancaster Gate and went westwards. At one o'clock they reached home. During the drive Mr. Talbot did not speak. Miss Talbot, except for a word or two in directing Don on the road, followed her father's example. A man was waiting at the house to take the car back to the garage.

The moment Mr. Talbot found himself in his invalid chair in the privacy of his room he burst into abusive speech. Eliza fled, knowing that she was only carrying out Don's wishes in so doing. He turned to Estelle, who had not yet removed her hat and gloves. She understood, and followed the parlourmaid without a word. Her father called after her, but she did not return.

Don faced the storm alone. He encountered Estelle later in the hall and spoke.

" I am sure that it is best for you to leave the room when he has one of his brain-storms, madam."

A shadow of a smile crossed her lips. He had chosen an apt description for the old man's paroxysms of temper.

" I believe you are right, Oakley. Poor old dad!"

The last words were not addressed to him and he knew it. Her eyes shone with sudden moisture, and the beautiful pearls on the white neck rose and fell as she suppressed a catch in her breath that might have been a sob.

" I suppose you come in for your share of abuse?" she asked with a solicitude that touched him. It made her seem more human.

" He is better when a third person is not present."

The daily routine, begun from the first hour of his arrival, continued with a monotonous regularity. It was much the same as had been instituted when

Mr. Talbot had his seizure. A busy City man, he had been struck down suddenly. The catastrophe would have been less severe had his mental powers remained untouched. But with the paralysis came a clouding of the brain, with this dreadful phase of bad language.

Shut up all day long with the invalid from eight o'clock in the morning to eight in the evening, carrying through his duties of valet, footman, companion and chauffeur, Don felt that he fully earned the five pounds a week, which at first had seemed munificent.

He did not complain. As his uncle had observed, people did not give something for nothing. He determined to carry on.

CH. III. DON LOSES HIS BILLET

At half-past eight in the evening Don was at liberty to leave the house. It was then that he paid a visit to his mother. She lived not far from Notting Hill Gate. He told her very little about his work. As he did not complain she was under the impression that he was satisfied with it. She congratulated him more than once in having secured a self-supporting billet in which he could put by a little money.

Occasionally he met his uncle. When they were together and by themselves the young man was less guarded. His uncle smiled grimly as he listened.

"Poor old Talbot! What a wreck! But he has made his pile and Estelle is his only child. She will have it all."

"Which fact doesn't concern me," said Don.

"Is she civil?"

"As civil as you can expect the lady of the house to be to a servant."

"You consider yourself a servant?"

"What else am I with my valeting and the serving of meals and driving my master out?"

"Employer," corrected Smith.

"What's in a name? The Talbots look upon me as a paid servant."

Smith was silent for a while. He could not controvert what his nephew had stated.

"Does the girl know who you are? That you were in the Navy?"

"I have never told her. I mentioned it in my advertisement, but I didn't state my rank. She has probably forgotten it by this time."

"Hasn't she shown any curiosity about the man who does everything for her father?"

"Never to my knowledge. She engaged me without any references. She was hard pressed for somebody to do the work; and now she is too full of her own affairs to think about her father's valet."

"Which are——?"

"Society. Going out and entertaining herself.

Since I have persuaded her to keep out of her father's room, she has had time for it. The old man has been much quieter and easier to deal with since he has seen less of her."

"How did you manage to induce her to stay away?"

"Told her straight out that I would not stop and hear any woman spoken to as her father was in the habit of speaking to her. She had already discovered that I was going to be useful and that the old man couldn't do without me. She gave in—not with a good grace. She sits with him while I take my meals."

"From all accounts Estelle Talbot is a very fine character. They say that she has had much to put up with."

Don glanced at his uncle.

"You know them?"

"I've made it my business to know something about them. Fact is, we City men all know something of each other by hearsay if not personally. Yes, I have met his daughter more than once." He stopped and then remarked: "Old Talbot was in the City."

"What was he?"

"A financier; clever, unscrupulous fellow. Ran fairly straight or he wouldn't be where he is. Went off his head all at once when he had the stroke. By that time he had made his pile and snugly invested it. You know what his particular craze is?"

"He has several crazes. One is to see how soon he can swear anyone out of the room," said Don with a smile.

"Another is that every man he meets is after his daughter and her money. Hasn't he made your blood boil with some of his insinuations?"

"I pay no attention to what he says."

"Two of his medical attendants chucked the job on account of his offensive remarks. The present doctor is an old man, well-seasoned. He laughs."

Don's thoughts dwelt on Estelle. The girl must have a marvellous courage to "stand fire" as she apparently had done. He wondered whether she had been obliged to put up with the same offensive remarks when his predecessor William had been in waiting. Probably William was of the usual domestic class and would not know how to face the coupling of his insignificant name with that of the daughter of the house. No wonder he had taken himself off abruptly and left the onus of attending the old man on Miss Talbot and the faithful Eliza.

"How long are you going to stick it?" asked his uncle.

"I really can't say. One day I may reach breaking point and do a bolt as William did," replied Don.

"Are you qualifying yourself for any other billet?"

"No, I hadn't thought of it. I don't see how I could manage it, tied as I am."

"I've heard you say more than once that if you ever left the Navy you would like a planter's life," said Smith.

"I've often thought I should. I once spent three months' leave, when my ship was stationed at Bombay, with an old school friend who was a tea-planter. To me it seemed a top-hole life. But you have to know the language sufficiently well to boss the coolies. Also a certain amount of office work is wanted."

"Where was the estate?" asked Smith.

"On the Western Ghauts, the mountains of South India.

"The language needed is Malayalam," said Smith. "Why not take it up? There's a school of languages not far from here where they can teach you. They have evening classes. There are other places where you can learn all you want of the working of a tea estate office, also at an evening class."

"I'll get on to both at once! Thank the stars my evenings are free."

His studies proved a boon. They seemed to put him in touch again with the world he had known, and to restore the self-respect that he was inclined to lose when he was airing Mr. Talbot's shirt and handing him towels and hair brushes.

During the ensuing months Don saw very little of Estelle, and that little became less as he settled into his stride. Sometimes it appeared as if she took pains to keep out of his way. More than once when they might have met in the hall outside the invalid's room, she had turned away abruptly with averted eyes as though she had not seen him.

There was, however, a period when she made no attempt to avoid him. For two hours and a half to three hours she sat by his side daily, including Sundays. Occasionally the sleeve of her fur coat brushed against his arm. During those precious hours the scent she used filled his nostrils. Those luminous pearls, which she never seemed to lay aside, gleamed at him and almost drew his eyes from the road in front to her neck. Every morning they sat in close proximity. They were practically by themselves. Mr. Talbot, his restless black eyes shining impishly, was out of hearing.

Estelle seldom spoke. Don was careful to keep silence unless he was addressed, and then the subject of their short conversation related to the road along which they were travelling. Although he still found it difficult to introduce the " madam " at decent intervals, he never forgot his position. The uniform coat he was obliged to put on when he drove them out prevented him from losing sight of the fact.

There was one thing in his life to which he never became reconciled. This was the manner in which he received his salary. Every Saturday at three in the afternoon he was obliged to go to the library, where Miss Talbot sat at the writing table that had been her father's.

Don stood at her side and she handed him an envelope containing his wages. From the five pounds had been deducted a trifling sum to pay his share of the cost of the stamps which she was obliged to put upon his insurance card. The card was in evidence, lying on the table so that he could assure himself that it was in order. There were other cards with it, also stamped, belonging to the cook, Eliza, the housemaid, kitchen-maid and a between-maid, who made up the establishment.

The staff was engaged by the month. They did not go through the ordeal, as Don called it, weekly. He regretted that he had not arranged for his salary to be paid monthly. Then he could have received a cheque instead of this abominable envelope of cash as if he was a trades' roundsman.

On the first occasion of the payment he was summoned to the library by the taciturn Eliza without being informed why his presence there was required. Miss Talbot held out the envelope.

"Your wages, Oakley. Please sign the book."

She pointed to the page on which his name was written with the amount due and the deduction made for the stamps.

"Wouldn't it be more convenient, madam, if you gave me a cheque at the end of the month?"

"We paid William and his predecessors by the week. I see no reason for altering the arrangement."

He did not reply. Somehow it irritated him to be brought into the same category as the late William. Yet there was no insult intended. It was all in order. He left the room as quickly as he could with the offending envelope in his hand. "Willing to learn his work." This, he concluded, was part of his work. No use quarrelling with it. In all other respects he might consider himself well treated.

In one matter Estelle had shown a consideration of which he was not aware. She had so arranged that he took his meals by himself, on the excuse that his duties in the master's room prevented him from joining the staff at the usual hours in the servants' hall. He was waited on by the between-maid, and while he ate his food Eliza or Estelle stayed with Mr. Talbot. To what extent they were subjected to the lash of the old man's tongue he did not know. Relief was apparent in the faces of both when he reappeared and set them free.

Don was making satisfactory progress with his studies. More than once his uncle had asked if he was not ready to give up his uncongenial work and look for some billet among the tea and coffee planters of South India. He had always replied that he would not be able to stand the strain of his present life much longer. At the same time he took no step to end his engagement with Mr. Talbot.

The tension existed, but it was not in the service he rendered to the old man. It lay in his association with Estelle. The daily drive had an attraction and lure that he could not resist. Life without that two hours of sweet proximity to the daughter of his employer would be dull indeed.

On the other hand it was a torment. Between them was that cursed barrier of class. He might sit there within touch of her for a century, there would still be the bar over which neither could step.

Their drives took them in all directions. Mr. Talbot expressed no desire as to the route. If asked which way he wished to go, he invariably replied "Home!" even though they might only just have started. He was therefore never consulted. Estelle signified the direction, leaving Don in no doubt about the way.

They passed through some beautiful spots, always in silence. Whether her sense of appreciation was roused or not he was unable to say.

One day they were driving westward by the road that borders the Thames at Runnimede. The wooded heights, with the castle appearing above, were on their left. To the right was the gleaming river, a sight that could not fail to stir the heart of any Englishman.

"How perfectly beautiful! How it appeals to one's senses," she said.

"All beauty does that," he replied, but he was not looking at the landscape as he spoke.

Unconsciously he slowed down. She turned to him and their eyes clung together, betraying a secret that appalled her and sent the blood surging wildly to his head. The mischief was done. The colour fled from her cheeks and left her as white as her pearls.

An impish cackle behind them broke and dispersed that golden bubble of bliss that for one moment had transported them into a forbidden heaven of delight.

Estelle glanced round swiftly. Her father was gazing from his pillows out of the window on his right at the river. The journey was finished in silence and Don's eyes were rigidly kept on the road ahead.

"I must put an end to this," he said as he tossed on his bed during the sleepless night that followed. "I can't stand much more of it."

Fate took a hand in his affairs and saved him from having to give up his job.

A few days later Estelle came into her father's room after lunch. Don was reading aloud from a sporting book. He stopped as she appeared and laid the volume on the table. Rising from his seat he glanced at her.

"Please stay., Oakley. The news I have for my father is no secret. It is already in the papers," she said.

Nevertheless, Don withdrew, passing out of sight behind the big screen that stood in front of the door. Estelle took the chair he had vacated.

"I have come to tell you, father, that Henry Browne proposed to me three days ago."

Her voice was hard and penetrating. She wished it to reach other ears besides her father's.

"The deuce he did!" responded Mr. Talbot, adding a special anathema for Henry Browne. "What did you reply?"

"I know that you will be pleased to hear that I accepted him. You have always been so anxious that I should marry."

"Not that young hound! I know him! Knew his father in the City, a thorough bad lot!"

A torrent of abuse poured from his lips, scorching her ears in the old style. She was astonished and hurt.

"I have never heard that Henry was—was undesirable," she said.

"I dare say not! What can you know of the men? Can't even recognise a white man when you see him! Tell the impudent dog that he is not to put a foot in my house——"

"But, father, don't you understand? I have promised to marry him and the announcement has been sent by his mother to the papers."

Abuse followed, and Estelle had no opportunity of getting in another word. Don entered. He was pale and was looking stern.

"You had better go, Miss Talbot," he said in a low voice. Her name slipped out unconsciously.

The old man's ears were abnormally sharp when he was excited.

"That's right, Oakley. Tell her to go, fool that she is!"

Estelle rose, flushed with anger.

"It's intolerable!" she exclaimed.

"I agree with you," rejoined Don quickly.

She was not aware to what extent he agreed. Mr. Talbot's language was, of course, intolerable, but the news of his daughter's engagement was of the same nature, intolerable. Don made the discovery that he was in close agreement with old Talbot, and the fact sent the blood pulsing through his veins.

Estelle turned to her father and waited till he paused to take breath.

"I have made the engagement and am not going to withdraw from it. I am afraid the marriage will have to take place whether you approve or not. It is a pity that you are placing yourself in opposition. I am disappointed. I hoped that you would be pleased." There was a note of regret in her voice as if she had thought to gratify her father by her action. She moved away to leave the room.

"D—— Henry Browne!" he shouted after her, the veins on his forehead swelling and his fingers working convulsively as they gripped the arms of his chair.

Before she passed behind the screen she said:

"I am very sorry, father; I wish you could reconcile yourself to it."

The pathetic note in her voice stirred Don strangely. He followed her to the door.

"Do go," he whispered. "It is bad for him to excite himself in this way."

Her eyes dwelt on him with an expression of despair, and the pearls on her bosom rose and fell quickly. She went out of the room, her fingers to her ears so that she should not hear those rasping curses.

As she disappeared Talbot stopped. He lifted his hands to his twitching face and covered his eyes. Through his fingers trickled tears.

The abuse addressed to a woman had once more roused Don's ire against Estelle's father. But when he saw the tears a wave of pity went through him, dispersing the anger. He had never before witnessed a breakdown on the part of his patient. It was painful and moved him more than a little. He waited till the storm had abated. Perhaps the tears would relieve the pressure on the brain, he thought.

"Shall I get you a glass of whisky-and-soda, sir?" he asked.

Mr. Talbot nodded his head in assent. Don poured out a small drink and handed it to him. As he returned the glass he said:

"Thanks, that's better. She upset me."

His voice and manner had suddenly changed. A curious note of sanity was struck.

"I have no one in this wide world to talk to," he said brokenly.

"That's because they don't like your—your incivility," replied Don, putting the difficulty as nicely as he could.

"I know; I swear too much. I never used to. I won't do it again."

"I don't mind, sir. It doesn't trouble me."

"Come here, Oakley. Draw your chair nearer. You are Oakley, aren't you? Young Donald, son of the old Donald Oakley I knew in the City. Poor old Oakley! Your father crashed. Lost every mortal thing he possessed in that bust-up." He named a celebrated House that had failed many, many years before, when Donald was a schoolboy. "He went home and died of a broken heart, leaving his widow and young son penniless. We all helped, of course; got the boy into the Navy and bought an annuity for the widow, poor soul! Old Browne had something to do with getting Oakley into that mess, an old scoundrel, he was! And from all accounts his son Henry is no better than his father; a little worse, if possible."

Don listened in amazement. Not one unprintable word all through the reminiscence. No abuse; no incoherence. Something had happened to restore the brain. He wondered if he ought to summon Miss Talbot. He decided that it would be better to keep the old man as quiet as possible. A second agitation might bring back the old unfortunate symptoms.

"Shall I lower the back of your chair, sir, so that you can get a little sleep?"

"No, I'll sit up and talk to you. You are Oakley's son, the boy we put in the Navy?"

"Yes, sir, I'm Donald all right."

"Donald! Yes, that's it. Why are you here taking a miserable wage to nurse a crabbed old man like me? You ought to be with your ship."

"I was 'axed' out of the Navy with a lot of other men eighteen months ago."

"Fools! letting the Navy down like that! How did you get here?"

"I put an advertisement in the paper asking for employment and Miss Talbot answered it."

"Wise woman! She ought to know a good man when she sees one! But what was that she was saying just now? Going to marry that sweep Henry Browne! She mustn't do it! Where are her wits? Why didn't she take young Donald Oakley, a clean, white man instead of that sweep?"

The pathetic tone of helplessness and regret stirred Don again to pity. The colour rushed to his brow as he said gently:

"Perhaps, sir, Donald Oakley did not ask her to marry him."

"Then Donald Oakley is a bigger fool than I took him for!"

Mr. Talbot closed his eyes, and Don regarded it as a sign that the subject was dismissed and that he wished to sleep. He lowered the back of the chair, lengthened out the leg rest and adjusted the pillow under the patient's head. Don arranged the blinds to reduce the light, moving about noiselessly as was his wont.

The invalid sighed deeply. It was evident that the news he had received from his daughter had given him a shock. If it had shaken him sane it would be a matter of congratulation for everyone concerned. It would put an end to the paroxysms of rage and bad language which, whatever he might say to the contrary, Don found impossible to bear with indifference even after twelve months.

The deep sleep into which Mr. Talbot fell was a relief. Don sat down for a few minutes, enjoying the quiet. At half-past four he went down to the pantry. Eliza handed him the tray. She knew what her mistress's errand was when she went to her father's room.

"How did the master take the news?" she asked with some curiosity.

"Badly," replied Don, who knew he was speaking to an old friend as well as servant.

"He hated young Mr. Browne before he was taken ill. I was afraid he wouldn't like it. I suppose he swore at her as usual. Poor Miss Estelle! She is an angel! The sweetest young lady that was ever born. I've known her since she was a child, and I say it."

He took up the tray. It was oddly pleasant to hear this praise, though why he should care for anyone's opinion about his employers he could not have said.

When he returned to the room he found Mr. Talbot still asleep. It was a pity to disturb him for tea. They were only too thankful when he did sleep. It was probably the whisky which had induced the sleep and the reaction after the excitement.

It was Don's custom to help himself from Mr. Talbot's tray. He did not think it necessary to wait as usual till he had given Mr. Talbot his cup. He poured some out for himself, and when he had finished he took up the book from which he had been reading aloud and continued to himself. Eliza entered the room. She glanced at the invalid.

"Poor dear! He's sleeping off his trouble."

"What shall I do about waking him?" asked Don. "He has had no tea."

"Let him be for the present. If only he wouldn't throw himself into such rages he'd be so much happier. It must be bad for him. When he wakes ring the bell and I'll bring a fresh pot."

Don and Eliza made every preparation for the master's comfort. Still he slept on. Eliza went close to the chair.

"It's a child's sleep," she said. "It will do him all the good in the world."

Don took up his book and resumed his reading. Eliza seated herself near the window. Whenever she had a spare moment she occupied herself with some knitting that she carried about with her. At the end of half an hour she slipped out of the room and summoned her mistress.

Estelle came and bent over her father, clasping his fingers. He did not move. She laid her hand on his forehead. The eyes remained closed and the chest rose and fell with regular breathing. She turned to Don.

"Ring up the doctor and ask him to come. Say that Mr. Talbot is very ill."

The old man did not recover consciousness. He lingered for a few hours and passed away peacefully. It was a relief to everybody, although nothing to that effect was actually said. Don's duties came to an abrupt termination. With his patient no longer requiring his services he felt himself in the way.

On the following morning he was asked to go to the library, the room in which Miss Talbot usually interviewed him when she handed him his salary. She was standing by the table. As he entered she turned to him with an envelope in her hand.

"I need not detain you here, Oakley. There is nothing more that you can do for me. With my father's death——" she said, choking down a sob.

"I quite understand," he replied hastily. "If there is anything——"

"I will ring you up on the telephone. Write down your address and number."

He did so. In exchange for the slip of paper she handed him the envelope.

"This contains a cheque. It is for twenty-five pounds, a month's wages instead of notice," she said.

"I was engaged by the week——" he began in protest.

She took no notice of his remark, but continued:

"And here is your insurance card. Should you require a testimonial I shall be pleased to give it."

"I shall not need it," he replied shortly. He felt that she was keeping him at a distance when there was no necessity for it. By this time she ought to know that he was the last man in the world to presume on circumstances where a little unbending might be exercised.

She held out her hand. A coldness and reserve was visible even in this slight action.

"Good-bye." After a pause she added: "Thank you for your services to my father."

Her voice was hard almost to ungraciousness. Something in her eyes belied her words. They were both aware, although they might not acknowledge it, that they were doing their best to suppress a storm of emotion that was threatening them.

It was the first time that he had touched her hand. It must be the last. His eyes fell from her face, white and set in desperate self-control, to the pearls on her neck. She was not aware that they betrayed her as they rose and fell tumultuously.

As long as he lived he would associate Estelle Talbot with pearls—the most precious gem among them, a pearl of a woman, to be claimed before long by this objectionable Henry Browne. Mentally Don echoed the old man's anathema: "Damn Henry Browne!"

Don packed up his few belongings and departed. Eliza saw him out of the house and said good-bye with the warmth of a fellow-servant who had been associated with him in the same duties. He did not offer to do more than lift his hat as he moved down the steps to get into the cab he had called up.

He drove straight to his mother's house. He had sent her a message to say that she might expect him home to lunch; his employer had passed away and his services were no more needed.

In her secret heart Mrs. Oakley rejoiced that his uncongenial employment had come to an end. He had been paid liberally for one in his position, but money was not everything.

Until Don sat down at his ease in his mother's house he had not realised how much he had hated his work. His frayed nerves recovered quickly. After a couple of months his mental balance was restored and the old cheeriness came back.

With the recovery of his spirits the ardent desire for work of some sort returned. This time he was not at a vague, loose end on the subject. He had mastered the language he needed and enough of the technicalities of office routine work to justify an application for an appointment on the tea estate which he had desired. He made the application, and after two or three weeks delay he was offered a billet that seemed satisfactory in every way. He would find himself among men of his own class, and would no longer occupy a position that was neither one thing nor the other. He was to leave England in six weeks' time. His passage was taken for him and he would land at Bombay, from which port he would travel by rail to his destination.

He was to be superintendent of a tea estate known as Oodiya. It was owned by a syndicate whose names did not appear. The firm called itself the Oodiya Trust.

Don had a shrewd suspicion that his uncle possessed an interest in it and that his connection with the directorate was largely responsible for having procured him the appointment. James Smith, however, disowned any complicity in the matter. As usual he had plenty of good advice to offer. He seemed to know so much about the life on the Indian Hills that Don enquired at last if he had ever been there.

"I paid the place a visit four years ago, before you left the Navy," Smith replied. "It's a fine climate if you can keep clear of malaria."

"How am I to do that?"

"Never sleep at a lower altitude than the bungalow, which on Oodiya is well above fever range; and keep your quinine within easy reach. You were in the district when you paid your old friend a visit."

"I am to have an assistant, I understand."

"A country-born, who knows the language and is capable of keeping the roll and estate accounts."

"Oodiya grows tea and coffee?"

"Chiefly tea in these days. They are opening rubber on the lower slopes. You have a lot of jungle and forest about you, where you ought to have some big game shooting as well as jungle fowl."

Before leaving England Don called at the house where he had filled the position that had proved so galling to his spirit. Eliza answered the door. He asked for Miss Talbot and was informed that she had left immediately after the funeral. She had gone on a trip to Norway.

"Alone, by herself?" he asked in some surprise.

"Quite alone," replied Eliza. She added: "Poor Miss Estelle! Her father's death was a great shock. She felt it so much because his last words to her were rough and unkind. She didn't deserve it."

"Mr. Talbot didn't know what he was saying. I suppose she will be married as soon as she comes back from Norway."

"The wedding was to have been in two months' time, but it has been put off to six. It's to be in January or February."

"Will she live in this house?"

"I believe not. It has been left to her, but she has taken a dislike to it and it is put up for sale. The car also is to be sold."

The car in which he had spent the happiest hours of his purgatory! But of course it was only what might be expected.

"Shall I give Miss Estelle any message?" she asked.

"No, no!" he replied hastily. "I was only her father's servant."

"The master didn't quite look upon you as that, Mr. Oakley," protested the old servant.

"Miss Talbot did."

"I am not so sure. Shall I say you called?"

"Please don't."

"Are you taking another situation?"

"Not like this last. I am going to India to one of the planting districts on the hills in Malabar."

"Then we shan't see you again?"

"No. What are you going to do, Eliza?"

"I shall stay with Miss Estelle till she is settled. She will be Mrs. Henry Browne by that time. Then I shall retire from service and go to a sister who is a dressmaker in Weymouth."

Donald shook hands with her and said good-bye. And so the door closed on a curious phase of his life in which he had learned many things that he would never forget.

CH. IV. ON THE SOUTH INDIAN HILLS

IT was a still dawn on the Indian Hills. The first rays of the sun shot up into the sky and pierced the clouds that hung all night round the peaks of the Western Ghauts. Rama's Peak stood in solid purple silhouetted against the pale primrose light of the sunrise. It jutted out skywards from the long range, individualising itself into a magnificent mountain seven thousand feet high. Yet the people who had chosen some of its slopes on which to plant their tea, coffee, and rubber called it and its neighbours "The Hills."

On the west the mountains ran down in places nearly to the sea coast. At other points their spurs were lost in rich level stretches of cultivation. On the east the hills merged into a wide expanse of plateau land from three to four thousand feet above sea level.

The immense range is clothed in luxuriant forest to the shoulders. Out of the jungle the peak lifts its head, with others, to serve as a landmark to the seamen on the Indian Ocean to westward, and to travellers through the grassland on the east.

The rocks are split in places and the clefts form ramparts and caverns which afford shelter for wolves, bears, and wild dogs to make their lairs.

In one of these caves a strange human being had taken up his residence. He belonged to the Indian gipsies, a jungle tribe widely spread and known as Lumbadees. They are skilled in taming wild creatures; monkeys, bears, snakes, and birds. They have other characteristics common to all gipsies. They are wanderers and pilferers; and, like the animals they tame, they prefer to live in the open.

In India for some centuries they have been the carriers from the plateau land of the peninsula to the West Coast. They possess a race of sturdy little cattle that are as sure-footed as goats and capable of bearing heavy loads. They travel over a wild, precipitous country where cart-roads cannot be made and bridges do not exist. They use paths that are mere game tracks, and they know of the existence of fords and stepping-stones over the hill-side torrents. Thick as the forests are in the tropical climate of the west of the peninsula the gipsies can find their way through the jungle with the same facility as the animals that are born in it.

The ancient Nahgoo, owner by right of appropriation of the cave, had partially separated himself from his tribe. The distances they covered in their transport operations were too great for his failing strength. He preferred to work by himself, going out and coming in as it suited him. He was able to move at his own pace and still carry a considerable load.

Living cost him next to nothing. He had a fine command of terrifying curses that made the blood of the superstitious villagers and woodcutters run cold. When he appeared a handful of rice was given to avert the evil eye. A reputation for having the power to "overlook" was a useful asset to the old man of which he took full advantage. Propitiatory offerings of fruit and grain came in handy for one whose wants were few.

Nahgoo was not knowingly an impostor. He firmly believed in his own power of malediction and in his ability to lay on his curses where he chose. The Indians with whom he came in contact, driving their buffaloes and goats to pasturage on the downs, cultivating their rice and their sugar-cane in the warm valleys, and cutting firewood in the jungles, took him at his own valuation and duly respected the mysterious magic that he claimed to have under his command. The Europeans, Inspector Hillary of the Police among them, measured him down from their own point of view and placed him, not altogether correctly, among the many frauds of the East.

Nahgoo undoubtedly possessed some strange powers that were inherited from a long line of ancestors who had lived in the jungles. Hypnotism was one of them. His familiarity with, and at times psychical control over, animals was another. He could imitate the calls of beasts and birds, and by the peculiar tone of his voice summon or dismiss them. He was skilled in tracking, and could follow the trail of an animal or a human being invisible to less experienced eyes.

The cave faced west and it was still in shadow. The sun was rising behind the mountain, flooding the downs of the plateau with its golden light. It would not reach the glistening, dewy forest for another forty minutes.

At the old man's feet lay a bundle of small logs divested of bark and outer wood. They were cut into short lengths and sewn in coarse sacking. The shape of the bundle betrayed its contents. If more evidence was needed to confirm its character it might be found in the faint aroma which it diffused.

It was sandalwood of the best and highest grade.

Sandalwood is a monopoly of the Mysore Government, one of the exports on which there is a heavy tax. It is smuggled down to the West Coast to be shipped to eastern ports in country-built vessels. The smugglers who carry away the sandalwood bring back another contraband article in the shape of salt.

Nahgoo had been a smuggler all his life. Many were the adventures that he had met with and the narrow escapes he had experienced. They had been as the breath of life when he was young. It was the trouble of his old age that he could no longer keep pace with other members of his tribe and their transport cattle. He now had to work on his own. Provided it was not too heavy a load he was still able to reach the coast in his own time. But the load for the journey back had to be light.

He had an intimate knowledge of the short-cuts, intricate paths that were nothing more than game tracks. He knew all the fords and the stepping-stones that might be used when the fords were flooded. He could creep under almost inaccessible rocks and boulders where nothing but a monkey would be looked for. Sleep was not courted till he was safe back in his domicile. Rain and wind he did not mind. The only phase of nature that he feared was cloud, the condensed mist that crept up the gorges to brood over the hidden stream and wrap the forest in an eerie veil. He carried no compass, but depended on his instinct of direction, which never seemed at fault.

He pulled his load out from a deep recess at the back of the cave where he had placed it the evening before after receiving it from a Mysore dealer who had employed him previously. He assured himself of the safety of the amulet that was bound upon his arm above the elbow. It contained hairs from the tail of an elephant, a couple of whiskers cut from the muzzle of a wicked old man-eating tiger after Hillary had shot it. Some sacred ashes had been obtained from a temple dedicated to Karli. These last were to protect him from the dreaded scourge of smallpox, for he had never been vaccinated. There were various other small objects that were believed would guard him against the evils that might lurk in his path.

He had procured a few parings of the Police Inspector's finger-nails—at the price of a small silver coin—from Hillary's dressing-boy. These were made infallible by the performance of pooja. If worn on the neck or arm they would render the Inspector blind to any object that the old man did not wish him to see.

For carrying the load of sandalwood to the coast he was to receive a rupee, a whole rupee. A rupee meant eight little silver coins the size of a threepenny bit; or sixteen large copper coins bigger than a penny; or a hundred and ninety-two pies, smaller than a farthing, but each having a purchasing power capable of supplying one or other of his needs.

It was good pay, in his opinion, for twenty miles of difficult travelling, carrying a cumbersome load of forty pounds on his shoulders. Moreover, there was an element of sport about it that appealed to the adventurous spirit of the Gipsy.

In addition to the promised rupee Nahgoo received a small gift that he prized highly. It took the place of the drink that is given by the European in similar circumstances to clinch a bargain. It was a ball, the size of a tangerine orange, made of jaggery, a soft treacly substance, sweeter than sugar, in which was incorporated enough opium to send a dozen men into their last sleep if swallowed in one portion.

Nahgoo had no intention of making one gulp of it. When he wanted his dose on his return home he pinched off a small piece and rolled it into a pill. It was sufficient to give him the blissful dreams in which he forgot the aches and pains produced by his long tramp. He awoke rested and refreshed and ready to start off again if requested. For the present the ball remained in the leather bag attached to the thong that supported his loin cloth. His journey must be accomplished first. Sleep would come afterwards.

He stood at the entrance of the cave. The distant view from the platform of rock outside was magnificent, but the old man was not interested in the beauty of the scenery. He had no fear of wild animals. Had he not provided himself with an infallible safeguard against the elephant and the feline tribe in the contents of his amulet? The smaller animals—monkeys, hyænas, jackals—would not molest him if he kept out of their way; and they were easily avoided by one who could read the signs of the forest.

He shaded his eyes with his bony hand and scanned the mountain-sides keenly. The air was as clear as crystal. The colours of the herbage and the rocks were as vivid as if they were close at hand. The clouds that had gathered on the mountain-sides during the night had sailed away and were dispersing in the azure under the fierce rays of the tropical sun.

He listened intently. No sounds fell on his ears—acute as a jackal's in spite of his age—but the familiar voices of the jungle. Giant trees far below him were ruffled by the soft breezes that blew in from the Indian Ocean. Malabar thrushes, the whistling ploughboy of the forest, were piping their morning songs. Parrots screamed and scuffled among the foliage, shooting like emerald arrows from tree to tree. The green barbets ran up the musical scale with their sharp, metallic notes, and the pigeons cooed over their nests.

Apparently he was satisfied. He lifted his bundle and balanced it on his shoulder. Reaching for a long bamboo, a trusty stick, the companion of many a long journey, he started out, leaving his dwelling to take care of itself. Its furniture consisted of an old charpoy laced across with cord, on which he spread his mat when he wanted to sleep, and a pile of greasy curry pots in a corner. A black blanket rolled in a grass mat completed the inventory.

He followed the level platform ledge for some yards, turning down a steep, narrow path. He was soon buried in the jungle that clothed the sides of the mountain.

The vegetation near the base of the peak was thin. The trees, exposed as they were to the full blast of the monsoon winds, were short and thick in the trunk, and the ferns and grasses underfoot were small. Lower down the growth was thicker, but the path was well-defined. It was more than a game track and had been kept clear by the small sickle-shaped billhooks of the woodcutters.

The jungle was still in shade. The dews of the night dripped from every leaf, and the breath of the morning was keen and exhilarating. The Gipsy was well content to be on the way, and he passed easily along the many zigzags by which the path descended towards the low country between the hills and the sea.

A thousand feet lower down the forest became denser and more luxuriant. The trees, straight of stem, rose like the columns of a cathedral and threw out spreading crowns of thick foliage sufficiently tough to withstand the spears of the monsoon rain. Their polished surface reflected the white lights of the morning and gave them the appearance of having donned mantles of silvery bloom.

The undergrowth was denser and more rank in character. Strong-winged butterflies, black, coppery, and of a vivid, metallic green flew up to meet the sunlight which was creeping down the slopes of the hills. Ferns rose breast high from cushions of moss. Above the ferns flourished the wild laurel and other bushes, some of them opening clusters of loose purple flowers, others diffusing the scent of an English hothouse from small wax-like blossoms of pale green or white.

Now and then Nahgoo stopped and stood motionless, like a wild animal instinct with the fear of meeting an enemy. He was conscious that he was breaking the law. Only lately two members of his tribe had been caught red-handed smuggling salt to the inland villages from the coast.

Inspector Hillary had been too smart for them. Their bullocks had been impounded and the salt confiscated. The cattle were retained until a heavy fine had been paid.

Nahgoo had no money to pay a fine. His property consisted of his old charpoy, his curry pots, the coarse blanket and the precious ball of opium. Over this last there might be trouble, for of all the dutiable commodities it was most difficult to account for its possession satisfactorily.

CH. V. A PYTHON ON THE PATH

INSPECTOR HILLARY had his headquarters at a station between the foot of the hills and the West Coast. When not conscious of ill-doing Nahgoo had no objection to meeting the Englishman. The old man had received many kindnesses from him. On the other hand the Inspector had found the Gipsy useful on more than one occasion. Not a soul passed up or down the ghaut without the knowledge of the old man. The travellers rarely caught sight of him. Nor did they see anything of the wanderoo monkeys sitting silently in the trees and watching like dogs at the garden gate all passers-by.

Nahgoo was also useful as a tracker. He knew the ways of the inhabitants of the forest and how to mark their coming and going. He was full of jungle lore acquired from his tribe. In addition he had a vast amount of wisdom picked up from his own observations during a long life in the forest.

But though the Gipsy and the Inspector were the best of friends Nahgoo had no use for a member of the police force when he was breaking the law. His offences were not of the major kind, but they were sufficient to render him liable to small punishments which were extremely irksome to the man of the jungle.

Hillary's chief was Assistant Superintendent Benacre. During the rains Benacre remained at headquarters, one of the stations on the West Coast.

He was never content to be long under the roof of a bungalow and, when there was a break, he went up into the hills to one estate or another, inspecting as he went along and pursuing enquiries of criminals. Just now he was busy on a case of murder committed four months ago. The victim was an Indian employed in a warehouse in Bombay. The murderer was a clerk in the office. He had escaped, gone south it was believed, and when the hue and cry had subsided would probably be looking for a billet of a similar character well out of reach of the Bombay police.

The forest, with its variety of phases, had bitten deeply into Benacre's soul, the penalty of living too long within its influence. He had neither wife nor child to keep him from Dame Nature. As soon as it was feasible he was up and off into the jungle with his tents and his servants and lascars. He had two good domestics, a cook known by the nickname of the Paddy-bird (from his long thin legs) and his assistant, the cook-boy, called the Poochee (insect). Their history has been written and need not be retold here.

At this particular time Benacre was camping on the high ground east of the peak. The weather was fine and likely to remain so, except for an occasional thunderstorm. He was within reach of a group of estates, one of which was Oodiya, where Don had arrived shortly before. Friendships are quickly formed among Europeans in India. In a planting community, which does not change, the men and women are more sociably inclined than in the big stations where there is no permanence and everybody is sooner or later on the move.

The planters had built their bungalows some fou or five thousand feet above sea level, out of fever range. They had also placed their coolie lines at the same elevation. It was easier to keep their labourers warm in a cold climate than to keep them free from fever at a lower elevation. The coolies themselves were well aware of the reason for bringing them and their families high up towards the breezy downs of the plateau. They were as anxious as their employers to reach the lines after the day's work, and took care not to be benighted on the lower slopes of the estates.

Hillary found it necessary to see his chief about the Bombay murder case. It involved a long walk. By starting early he could do it in the day, lunching at the camp and returning by sunset.

Like his chief he was a keen sportsman and rarely moved without his gun. On more than one occasion his path had been obstructed by a leopard. Apart from securing a good skin he had removed a menace to the woodman's life by shooting the animal.

To-day, for obvious reasons, Nahgoo was anxious to avoid an encounter with the Inspector. Although his eyes might be rendered blind by virtue of the amulet, the police officer might ask questions. A plausible story to account for his burden would not serve. The sandalwood betrayed itself, picked wood as it was, the precious heart of the tree, commanding a high price.

Nahgoo had no excuse to offer for being in possession of it if it were discovered. It would not mean a fine. He was too poor to pay it. In default it would be nothing less than imprisonment within four walls, in itself a dire punishment for a man whose home was in the forest. He was one of its children, like the Malabar thrush, the wanderoo monkey, and the green and black butterfly. Shut within four walls out of the sun and the mountain breeze he would die. Come what might he must not be caught with his burden.

Ever alert he paused in his steady tramp. Below to the right was a deep depression with a wall of rock running round it on three sides. It was the cul-de-sac of a warm, snug valley between two shoulders of the mountain. A small stream tumbled over a rocky bed at the bottom of it.

A colony of monkeys had settled on the ledges of the rocky walls. They came down to drink at the stream and played about in the sun like a lot of happy, irresponsible children. Nahgoo knew of their existence and had studied their habits. Sometimes in passing that way to make a short-cut up or down the face of the rock, he threw them a bunch of over-ripe bananas that he had begged from a fruit merchant in the village he had just visited. The monkeys knew him well and looked for his coming.

Sometimes he brought the trimmings of sugar-cane, which they greedily devoured. If a stranger showed himself they chattered at him and perhaps screamed and scolded till he passed out of sight.

As a rule they were quiet little people, wandering into the forest for their food—berries, grubs, and sweet roots of the fern. Apparently they were controlled by an old grey monkey, wrinkled and loose-skinned like an aged man. He was not too old to bite and scratch those who rebelled against his authority. The young ones growled and scolded and played, chasing each other up and down the stone ramparts, running along the branches of the trees, and taking long flying jumps from one to another, playing games in which their leader could no longer join.

The sound that arrested Nahgoo's attention and brought him to a halt was an unusual chatteration among the monkeys. They had seen something that disturbed them. He concluded that it was the presence of the Inspector.

On a previous occasion Hillary had fired his gun near the colony, not at one of the tribe, but at a fine, fat pigeon that made him an excellent supper that same evening. The loud report with its echoes had terrified the monkeys and they had never forgotten it. Whenever Hillary passed that way subsequently they greeted him with growls, associating his appearance with the never-to-be-forgotten explosion.

Nahgoo concluded from the little people's agitation that the Inspector was approaching by this very path and presently they would meet. To avoid being questioned about his load the Gipsy turned off the path and followed a narrow game track, steep and rough and deeply hidden in the thick undergrowth. The track ran parallel with the one he had left.

Hillary's object in coming up the mountain was to reach his chief's camp. But he had diverted his steps to look in on Nahgoo. He had something to say to the Gipsy concerning the crime that had been committed at Bombay.

The old man moved down the declivity with firm tread. His staff was in one hand. The other hand touched the bundle on his head to steady it. The cooler air of the higher elevation was lost and the jungle became more tropical in its character. He was careful to avoid boulders and keep to where the vegetation was soft.

Suddenly his right foot fell on a yielding object that was cold to the touch. The weight he carried made his tread heavy. He imagined that he had trodden on a liana that had been detached from the tree on which it grew and was lying on the ground.

It took much to send anything like a thrill through the seasoned old frame of the Gipsy. He looked down sharply and his blood ran cold. His large, naked foot had descended upon a python.

In a moment three feet of tail-end circled his ankle with a close grip that held him fast.

He tried to disengage his leg, but the grip tightened. He was a prisoner held firmly by the snake. A low hiss, like steam beginning to escape from a safety-valve, came from the bush close at hand.

Except for the coil round his ankle he could not see its body, which was hidden in the bush. It was nine or ten feet long, known to the woodcutters as a rock snake. A mouse-deer, the smallest of its kind, and no bigger than a hare, had served for its breakfast. When Nahgoo's foot fell upon it, the snake was in the act of gliding into the bush to lie up under cover of the thick foliage till it had digested its meal. There it would be safe from the eye of the snake-eagles that were wheeling and soaring above the sun-touched cliffs.

Pythons have no poison fangs. Their weapon of defence is the power to coil round an object and squeeze the life out of it. It is a slow process, but none the less deadly. They do not attack unprovoked, and will remove themselves out of the way if given time and opportunity.

They are not easy to see. It is the muscular movement of their scaley length as they glide that betrays them. The Indians say that they have feet under their gleaming skins and that these can be discerned by a rippling movement.

The movement is due to muscular action. The belief is strengthened by the power possessed by some snakes of springing from a hard surface if startled or frightened.

In colour the pythons are of the mottled browns and olives that are common to the stalks of tropical vegetation. Over the deeper shades prismatic colours gleam, but these fade immediately after death.

Nahgoo was not out to study the beauties of nature. He would fain have allowed the snake to go its way if only he could have disengaged his foot from the tail. He had enough presence of mind to refrain from struggling. The less movement he made the better chance he had of being set at liberty. His one hope was that the snake would presently uncoil itself and disappear.

CH. VI. THE INSPECTOR OF POLICE TO THE RESCUE

NAHGOO stood patiently for some minutes. He was considering. If he could relieve himself from the weight of the load he carried, the snake might release him as it felt a lessening of the pressure. A bundle of firewood, his own property, could have been thrown aside as of no value to anyone but himself. But the sandalwood did not belong to him. It had been delivered into his charge and he was responsible for it.

Although the Indian gipsy is an incorrigible pilferer, it is one of the characteristics of his race that he keeps faith with his employer. He delivers the goods entrusted to him intact and unharmed by careless carriage or accident. The instinct is bred and born in him. It was troubling Nahgoo now. Never had he broken faith with his employers and he was determined that he would keep the old trust as long as he had any life left in him.

He must hide his burden. It must be thrown out of sight into the jungle and left there till he could return and pick it up. Tethered as he was by the snake this was no easy task. Below was the stream tumbling over its bed of boulders. The banks were covered with wild begonias, balsams, ginger, and straggling fern. The vegetation afforded sufficient cover to hide the sandalwood, but he must take care not to allow it to fall into the torrent. Some hours soaking would do it no good.

He dropped his staff. Lifting the load with both hands he pitched it to his left. It fell into a deep bed of the many-fingered fern familiar as a pot-plant in European florists windows.

Then he turned his attention to the python. The coil about his foot grew tighter. Before long it would effect his circulation and cause his ankle to swell. He stooped and looked closely at the small portion of the speckled body that was visible. It was undoubtedly moving, not forward, but backward. It was coming out from the bush, pushing itself into a curve about his foot. As soon as it was clear of the stems and branches it would coil itself round the thin frame of the Gipsy, crush his ribs, and slowly squeeze the life out of him, taking two or three hours to accomplish its deadly purpose.

The process of the snake emerging was slow on account of the mouse-deer which it had swallowed. The weight hampered its movements, but Nahgoo was not aware of this fact. Any moment the end might come with a swift, sudden motion. When the head appeared he might try to beat it down with his staff, but he knew that he could not kill it. Even if he broke its back it could still exert its muscular power to kill him.

His thoughts flew to the Inspector, who so rarely went into the forest without his gun. A short time ago Nahgoo had been doing his best to avoid him. Now his one hope was that he might attract his attention. He recalled the alarmed voices of the monkeys. The Englishman could not be far off.

His stout old heart took courage, and he raised his voice in the long call of the woodcutters by which they keep in touch with their fellows when they are gathering firewood in the jungle. He sent his S.O.S. call over the slopes of the mountain.

The amulet was still bound about his arm. He touched it to make sure that it was there. To its magical powers he attributed the slowness of the action of the snake. The serpent tribe, when they attack, dart with lightning rapidity upon the enemy. The movement is so quick that the eye can scarcely follow it. At any moment the whole body might be withdrawn from the bush and he would find himself in the very centre of its coils.

Again he sent forth the long, penetrating call. The python responded with a hiss. Suddenly the head appeared lying on the ground, the glittering eyes fixed upon the Gipsy, its black forked tongue fluttering in and out of its mouth.

Slowly the head rose and faced him. The snake was still hampered in its movements by the weight of the deer. It reared up, its ugly head swaying from side to side. The Gipsy knew that it was about to close with him and that he was facing death.

The deafening report of a gun startled him. The coil round his ankle loosened as the tail lashed out. He sprang aside, free.

The python had received a charge of shot at close quarters in its head. Its long brown body tied itself into huge knots as it writhed in its death agony.

The two men retreated to the path Nahgoo had left. They turned to look at the snake. It was not a pleasant sight. Hillary glanced up at the sun.

"It will be some time before it is quiet," he said, "even though I have blown off its head!"

"Not until the sun goes into the sea will it die. If your honour fired at it many times it would still writhe and struggle. It is a curse placed upon all snakes for some evil done in the time of the gods, when the father of the tribe took the drink prepared for the gods. They die slowly, inch by inch, till darkness comes over the forest. Snakes are all bad, whether they carry poison or not."

They climbed up to the path from which the Gipsy had diverged. The Inspector took the lead, Nahgoo following behind. The old man cast a sharp, comprehensive glance round him as he left the game track. To-morrow he would return and carry his load to its destination.

"Did you think that I should hear your call?" asked Hillary.

"I heard the monkeys screaming at your honour and his gun as you passed under their rocks."

"It would have been out of my way if I had gone by the monkeys' rocks. It was not my presence that made them scream."

"Why did they cry out?"

"I don't know. It may have been the rogue elephant that has come up from the south."

"Has your honour seen it?"

"No. The news came by the wires and I have orders to shoot it. It has done much harm and killed two men who were working on their fields."

Nahgoo grunted. To blunder into a rogue elephant would be as dangerous as treading upon a snake.

"Which way are you going?" Hillary asked.

"I am returning to my cave."

"What were you doing down there in the jungle?"

"I was gathering firewood. But it has been an unlucky day. I have lost my bundle. This morning as I came out a jungle rat crossed my path. It was unwise of me not to take notice of it. I should have waited. To-morrow I may have better luck.

They reached the cave and Hillary seated himself on a boulder near the entrance. Ten minutes rest would not come amiss after the climb. It would also give him the opportunity of making a few enquiries.

"Have you been to the new English Dorai's place yet, the Oodiya estate?"

He put the question indifferently, but he listened for the reply with interest.

"I was there yesterday. I carried firewood for the cookroom. The cook sent the kitchen-boy to say that some was needed."

"Good, I told Mr. Oakley that Nahgoo, the Gipsy, would cut all that he needed. Serve him well and he will pay well."

"I will not spoil your honour's name."

There was an absence of gratification in Nahgoo's voice that struck Hillary's ear.

"I am satisfied that my name is safe in the keeping of the father of the forest. The cook pays for the firewood?"

"His honour, Mr. Oakley, has a cook-butler, with a man under him to help. The butler pays."

"And he pays badly, eh?"

"It might be better. By much walking and cutting from sunrise to sunset I can earn two annas. It may be that someone else will have to gather firewood for his honour's kitchen. Your honour's servant is no longer young."

"Yet he can walk sometimes from the top of the hills to the West Coast—if the pay is good."

The Gipsy blinked his eyes, but made no reply. He was not anxious to be questioned on that subject.

"This butler employed by Mr. Oakley, where did the master find him?"

"It is said by the servants on the other estates that he came from Madras with characters written on paper."

"Is he a good bungalow servant?"

"The others laugh, but he pleases his master greatly."

"And Mr. Oakley is new to the country."

"He has been three months on the Oodiya estate and he speaks the language of the people."

Hillary rose to his feet.

"I must be off," he said. "If you hear news of the rogue elephant let me know and I will give you a present. Keep out of the way of snakes when you are making tracks for the West Coast. Next time I may not be there to shoot it."

The following morning Nahgoo started out from his cave on his illicit journey. No rat crossed his path and no ill-omened bird hovered over his head to warn him off his journey.

He recovered his precious bundle. It had sustained no harm from lying out all night in its bed of fern. The python was dead from its head to its tail. The ants and beetles of the forest were busy in their myriads performing the duty of scavengers, but the air was poisoned for the time being. Nothing can exceed the foul odour given off by a dead snake in the tropics a few hours after life is extinct. Nahgoo was inured to bad smells of all kinds, but this was the limit. He spat at it and hurried away.

To-day he had no fear of meeting the Inspector. It was not likely that he would be repeating his visit to his chief, the only object which would bring him that way. He would have inspection duty in another direction. The people on the hills, as well as in the low country, had an intimate knowledge of the habits of the police and their movements from the Assistant Superintendent and Inspector down to the village constable.

The sandalwood was safely delivered and the rupee paid. Nahgoo changed it into small silver coins and coppers, which he hid about his person with as much care and secrecy as if they were the highly prized Australian sovereigns. Some of the small silver coins were tied into various parts of the cotton cloth that was wrapped round his hips. The rest, with the coppers, were disposed of in the folds of the piece of turkey red that served as turban when he was away from his cave on his various jobs.

He had with him a small brass lota. He carried it by a string attached to its neck. It contained drinking water. There were plenty of mountain streams in which he might cool his feet and wash away the dust of travel, but for drinking purposes he was shy of jungle water. It meant dysentry. His supply came from the downs and flowed into the forest near his cave.

He had brought with him a small sack in which was his food. On the journey home it served for the few purchases he made in the bazaar of the town where he had left the sandalwood. The half-filled sack and the lota were all he had to carry on the homeward journey.

He had plenty of time to reach home before sunset. Having no load to burden him he took from his belt his sickle-shaped chopper and cut firewood as he went. A bundle was required the next day in the kitchen on the Oodiya estate. Although the pay was bad he must not give up gathering wood. What was a poor old man to do who could no longer take his share of work with the tribe? Bundles of sandalwood did not come every day in his direction.

His search for dry wood led him away from the beaten track. He crossed the stream where it leaped over a barrier of rock and cascaded down to the low country. In places the little river spread out into pools, where the wild animals came to drink, or it tunnelled through fairy glens in the undergrowth.

As he began to climb up the opposite slope by one of the game tracks leading from the stepping-stones and the pool just below, he heard, high up on the ridge, the unmistakable trumpet of an elephant.

Alert, with all his jungle wits about him, he listened. The trumpeting was not repeated. The elephant was too far off for him to catch the sound of crashing saplings and underwood as the big beast pushed its way through the jungle.

In that district there were no herds of wild elephants. They preferred the forests farther south. This must be the rogue mentioned by the Inspector. Nahgoo remembered that he had spoken of a reward if news were brought of its locality.

Shikar news does not consist of merely reporting that game is on the move. The sportsman must know from what direction the beast has come, where it is lingering to find food, what waterhole it is frequenting, and the general direction it is taking in its wanderings.

The utmost care must be observed by the shikari in tracking. Very little will frighten away the quarry. An elephant, if startled, will run crashing through the forest, probably keeping to the ridges, for a matter of thirty miles without stopping. A tiger or a leopard will also put a considerable distance between itself and the spot where its suspicions have been aroused before it is content to seek its food and drink.

Nahgoo knew that he must go warily. He glanced at the sun. It was still high in the heavens. He held up a moist finger to assure himself of the direction of the wind. It was blowing from the quarter in which he had heard the trumpeting. The elephant would not get wind of him.

He threw down the firewood. The pay for tracking would be better than the sum of money he would receive from the cook.

He worked his way up with the utmost care, avoiding dry sticks that might snap under his foot. He was ready to dart aside and hide should he catch a glimpse of the animal. Frequently he stopped to listen, but everything was silent. Had it gone on over the hill? If so he would have small chance of coming up with it.

After a long, stiff climb he found himself on the edge of the forest. The jungle ended abruptly and before him extended a rounded headland covered with grass, not the turf of the temperate climate, but the long waving grass of the south Indian downs. Halting he gazed to right and left, but could see nothing.

A giant tree that had stood on the margin of the forest had been blown down. Its roots had brought up with them a great slab of earth on which still flourished grass and ferns. The trunk of the tree lay in the jungle and the crown of foliage, still green and fresh, held it aslant.

Nahgoo examined the ground for footprints of the elephant, deep, round impressions that could not be mistaken for the tracks of any other kind of animal. He could see no sign of its having passed that way. Yet his jungle sense of direction gave him the impression that it was from this spot that the trumpeting had come. The beast was either resting in the jungle not far away, or it had worked its way over the downs and was now descending into the next valley on the other side of the mountain's shoulder. In this case it was too late to follow or to attempt to pick up its tracks.

As he stood by the side of the fallen tree a thin wisp of mist, rising from the valley behind him, curled up over the jungle. It was the first herald of the cloud that was creeping up, following the course of the stream, to brood over the mountains during the night. The sun was by this time in the west.

Nahgoo glanced back at the track by which he had come. If the cloud thickened, dropping into the forest and permeating it with mist, he would not be able to find his way to the stepping-stones by which he had crossed. There is nothing more bewildering to the traveller in the hills than to be enveloped in the fog of a dense cloud.

He waited, watching the mist. The wind had dropped except for an occasional little gust. In another five minutes the cloud had thickened and passed beyond the jungle. It swept slowly over the downs and wrapped the landscape in a veil, varying in density. Sometimes it was like a white sheet before his eyes. Every feature of the landscape was blotted out. Then it parted as though some hand had lifted a curtain and objects became visible.

Nahgoo was familiar with this phase of the forest. Although he had been enveloped in cloud on many occasions it was never a pleasant experience and he did not like it. It had a paralysing effect, producing a kind of blindness that was embarrassing. There was nothing to be done but to remain where he was until the cloud lifted, which might not be till dawn. He had no blanket with him to protect him from the cold, damp air which, as soon as the sun set, would be chilly and unpleasant. His loin cloth would serve as a sheet and the turban unrolled would extend its folds to form a protection for his head and neck.

Suddenly the sun broke through the mist. Was it going to clear for just sufficient time to enable him to find his way back? After the sun had set the cloud would return. Thinking no more of his tracking, but of the best way to get home, he stepped out from behind the great screen formed by the roots of the fallen tree, and was about to move into the open, grassy land bordering the jungle when an ominous sound riveted his attention.

Blundering through the forest, smashing down young trees and the undergrowth, came the elephant, as uneasy as the human being to find itself in the enveloping mist.

Fifty yards away it burst out into the open. Simultaneously with its appearance the Gipsy vanished. He sprang back to the tree, dropping his brass water vessel and sack. Like a rat he burrowed under the great trunk, worming his way up through the herbage towards the base, always keeping the stem above him, till he lay prone and flat as he could make himself, devoutly hoping that he was hidden from view.

The elephant paused, snorting, and flapping its huge ears backwards and forwards to catch any little sounds that might betray the presence of an enemy. It raised its trunk, swinging it up and down as it tried to get the wind of any stranger that might be near.

It was through the rift in the cloud that Nahgoo had caught sight of it. Had the elephant at the same moment caught sight of the Gipsy?

The cloud gathered again and thickened. This time it was to the intense satisfaction of the old man. But he did not feel by any means safe under cover of the mist. He knew that the elephant's movements did not depend only on sight and sound. If once it winded him it would make straight for the spot where he was in hiding. His salvation from destruction would then rest only in the efficiency of his shelter.

With the increasing density of the cloud came little spiral gusts of air which blew unsteadily from first one point of the compass and then another. In time a whiff would meet the keen nostrils of the animal.

All in a moment the elephant winded him. With a scream of rage it swung round, rolled up its trunk and made for the spot where Nahgoo lay. The Gipsy shivered, and his blood ran cold with deadly fear.

The elephant did not re-enter the jungle. It tramped backwards and forwards on the grass, bringing its big feet down with thuds that seemed to shake the earth. Now it rampaged in the open, going away from the forest. Then back it came to the very edge, almost brushing the upstanding screen of roots of the fallen tree with its sides.

Suddenly its foot fell on the brass pot, which flattened out under its weight. Again and again the beast brought its great hoof down, evidently finding immense gratification in utterly destroying this unknown and foreign object that bore the scent of man.

It ceased its trampling as abruptly as it had begun, and went off at a clumsy amble through the grass in the direction of the distant valley on the other side of the shoulder of the mountain. It was satisfied, and Nahgoo knew that for the present the danger was over.

But he dared not leave his hiding-place. The elephant was mad. It was possessed of a devil. At any moment it might come back and find its way into the forest again to seek shelter from the cold mist, in which case there would be the danger of another encounter.

Scratching the ground smooth beneath him, Nahgoo made himself as comfortable as he could in his narrow quarters. Sleep was impossible. His ears were strained to catch the dreaded trumpetings that would warn him of its return.

At the first streak of dawn he crept out of his strange bed. The sight of the earth where it had been trampled made him quail. Not a square foot was left intact. The grass was battened down as though a steam-roller had passed over it.

He picked up the water pot. It was flattened beyond repair. His sack, which had fallen in the vegetation on the edge of the jungle, was intact. It had escaped destruction. Nahgoo opened it and took out a few mouthfuls of food, which he ate hastily while he walked.

Making his way down the mountain, he followed a game track that led him to the foot of the hills. As soon as he reached the road in the low country he started off at a jog-trot and made straight for the bungalow of the Inspector.

Hillary caught sight of the old man as he came up the steps of the veranda. He told the constable, whom he was interviewing, to stand aside and called to Nahgoo to enter the office. He felt sure that the Gipsy could only have come for one purpose—to give him news of the rogue elephant.

Nahgoo related the tale of his adventures, beginning at the wrong end by declaring his conviction that the animal was possessed by an evil spirit.

"The elephant has a devil, your honour. I felt it while I lay under the tree. My liver turned to water. I was like a grub under the bark of a tree when the wood-bird hammers. It was the presence of the devil that took away my strength."

Hillary had to lead him to the beginning of his story and ask several questions before he could find out how it was that the Gipsy met the elephant.

"You heard it trumpeting in the jungle as you were cutting firewood. How far off was it when it first spoke?"

"About as far as a woodcutter's loud hoo-hooh when he is in the forest, your honour."

"And how long was it from the time you heard it to the time you saw it?"

"Not as long as it takes for spittle to dry on the ground in the sun."

"Where was it?"

"Hiding in the jungle at the top of the hill to catch me. A cloud came and blinded it."

Bit by bit the story in its proper sequence was extracted.

"When did you leave your hiding-place?"

"This morning as the flying foxes came back to hang upon the trees, your honour."

Hillary was accustomed to the manner of speech of the hillmen. The Gipsy's words conveyed the information he wanted, although the idiom was not elegant. On two points he was anxious to have accurate news—from which direction the elephant had come and in which it seemed to be moving. If by great good luck he could find it, it would fall to his rifle and be a prize. While Nahgoo was lying low during the night, thought the Inspector, the rogue could have travelled many miles. Possibly it had gone back towards the district in which the herd lived. But it would never be permitted to join the herd again. In all probability it would return in this direction, to wander, homeless and savage, where it could find water and food and perhaps have access to the sugar-cane plantations of the low country.

"See, your honour!" cried Nahgoo, holding out the crushed brass pot. "Could anything but a devil have turned my chumbo into a flat dish?"

Hillary left the question unanswered.

"Could you see by its tracks in which direction the elephant went?" he asked.

"Towards the afternoon sun; but, having a devil, who can say where it went and where it will stay? Your honour must put silver in the gun when you shoot."

"The silver must go to the father of the forest to pay him for all the dangers he has been through," said Hillary, handing the old man a rupee, to his intense satisfaction.

Nahgoo was dismissed to the back premises, where he was provided with hot coffee and rice cakes. He had a large gathering round him to hear the history of the terrible devil that had taken up his abode in the forest; and how the old man had been saved from death by the power of the marvellous amulet that was tied upon his arm and was visible to all who cared to look at it. In it, he assured his hearers, there were three hairs of magical potency from the tail of a rogue that was killed when he was a young man.

CH. VIII.

A MURDERER AT LARGE

AFTER delivering Nahgoo from the toils of the python, Hillary had walked on to Oodiya, where Benacre had pitched his camp. Oakley and the Assistant Superintendent had already become friendly. There was a flat space on the estate out towards the downs, not far from the Oodiya bungalow, which formed a suitable site in that hilly country for the erection of tents. Don gladly made him free of it. It was an advantage to have a friend within easy reach, not ten minutes distant and within his own borders.

Benacre brought his own servants. He refused to be a guest in the house, although he would have been warmly welcomed. A police officer needs an office of some kind where he can interview members of his staff on business of a private nature.

Hillary's visit entirely related to business and had nothing to do with the social life of the planting community. He was known to the planters and liked; but unless business took him in their direction he saw very little of them.

He approached the Oodiya bungalow by the forest path that passed near the Gipsy's cave. The trail that branched off to the cave was an obscure game track not easily distinguished.

The path brought him to the back of the outbuildings of the Oodiya estate. Hillary elected this morning to call in at the kitchen and servants' quarters as he had some enquiries to make.

As he came round from the outbuilding he found himself face to face with a tall, powerful Muhammadan. The man was about forty years of age and wore a very short beard, which was cut square and close to his face. It gave him a fierce expression, which possibly may have belied his character. He had deepset black eyes and thick eyebrows. He had given his name as Cassim when he was engaged. Oakley had expressed himself well satisfied with him on the whole as a bungalow factotum and "head boy."

Cassim looked startled to find the Inspector about to invade his domain. He knew him by sight, having seen Hillary on his way to and from the camp, but they had not spoken, neither of the men being inclined towards idle conversation.

"Is your honour looking for me?" Cassim asked politely and in excellent English.

"I am looking for you. You are Mr. Oakley's butler?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have been ordered by the authorities at headquarters to make a list of all the servants employed in this district and to take their names and ages. It has to do with the Government tax. Call everyone, man, woman, and boy, that you have under you."

"Yes, sir. It shall be done at once. The cook is just back from the bazaar with the kitchen-boy. I don't think anyone is absent just now."

He was about to hurry away when Hillary stopped him.

"Your name is Cassim, I think. Mr. Oakley told me——" He referred to some notes. "Here it is. You are a Muhammadan from—er——"

"Triplicane, Madras," said Cassim quickly. "My father has a small shop there. My brother helps him, and I have been for some years with the English sahibs. Does your honour know Colonel Bayne of Bangalore?"

"I've heard of him."

"I have a good character chit from him if your honour would like to see it. He gave it when he went to England six months ago. I was with him four years, and if he returns to India I am to go back to his honour."

"That's good. Thanks, Cassim, I think that is sufficient about yourself." The man looked relieved at the reassuring words. "Now let me see the people you have under you."

There was a muster of the establishment outside the kitchen door. Hillary noted down names and ages and the town or village where they had their homes. They were a very mixed company. The cook and the matey looked respectable. Both were Hindus and wore neatly tied turbans. They were well dressed, whether at their own expense or their master's Hillary could not tell. The rest were decidedly jungly. All declared themselves to be Hindus.

"You have no Muhammadans among them?"

"No, sir. These men work satisfactorily. They are used to the climate and understand the language of the hillmen."

"And your master pays well, I dare say. Send them back to their jobs." Knowing the absurd dread the Indians have of the police he added: "This is only a Government enquiry. They need have no fear that they will be wanted on any charge. Make it plain to them, or perhaps they may run away, and that will be very inconvenient for Mr. Oakley." He looked at Cassim and added: "You speak good English yourself. Where did you learn it?"

"At the mission school in Triplicane."

"Now I must go on to the camp. Is Mr. Benacre there?"

"He is here in the bungalow talking with Mr. Oakley, who has just come in."

"Please go and tell him that Inspector Hillary would like to see him. I will walk on to the tents."

Benacre broke off his shikar conversation with Don and went out at once to find Hillary.

"Well, what luck have you had?" he asked, as they seated themselves on camp chairs near the tents and under the shade of some trees.

"None, I am afraid, sir," replied Hillary. "I have been busy three days over these domiciliary visits and I finished up with this bungalow. I have taken a list of the servants employed in every house in the district."

"You have had an Indian detective helping you. He knows, of course, the sort of man we are looking for?"

"Yes, sir. A smooth-faced, closely shaven Hindu, above the average height; of a brown complexion, not black; able to read and write English well. He must be rather above the servant class."

"That's right," responded Benacre. "I have been round some of the estates myself and have seen the writers and managers, Indian, in the offices and the coffee and tea factories. I left you to overhaul the domestic staffs. Once or twice I have had my suspicions aroused; but in each case the employer has been able to satisfy me as to the man's antecedents. The murder was committed four months ago. If the employer can assure me that he has had the clerk with him on the estate for at least six months, it is of no use troubling farther. The criminal we want was permanently employed at Bombay and could not have been at work anywhere else."

"Is it possible that they have made a mistake in Bombay about the man?" asked Hillary. "He can quite easily have gone farther south by a coasting vessel and have got off at Colombo or Galle, or even Trinco."

"I suggested that very thing to the Bombay authorities, but I have had a letter to say that they know for certain that the murderer came to South India. And they suspect that he has found employment in the office of some Indian merchant or he has taken service with a European," said Benacre.

"I have marked down every house in which there has been a change of servants during the period. I found only four bungalows besides Mr. Oakley's where an alteration in the staff had been made. They consisted of one new butler, two cooks, and one matey. The new men are Hindus. They presented the usual letters of recommendation when they applied for their situations, and each one gave a satisfactory account of himself and his antecedents."

"Are they West Coast boys?" asked Benacre.

"Two of them are from Madras. The two cooks are from Goa and belong to the Portuguese Church.

I am making enquiries, and, so far, everything I hear corroborates their account of themselves," replied Hillary.

"The only planter new to the district is Mr. Oakley. His entire staff has been recruited within the last four months," said Benacre.

"I have just seen his employés. The head boy is a Muhammadan, Cassim by name. You must have noticed him several times in the bungalow, sir."

"Yes, Cassim looks a thorough-paced Muhammadan. He wears the turban and Mussalman dress and has a beard that no Hindu in the south would be seen dead with. I wonder how Mr. Oakley picked him up," observed Benacre.

"I enquired of the boss himself," replied Hillary. "The man presented himself as a candidate for the billet one day when Mr. Oakley was at the hotel in Madras on business. Cassim was backed by a strong recommendation from the hotel manager."

"An Indian?"

"Yes; Mr. Oakley thought he could not do better than take him on. He was wanting a servant badly, being new to the country. He says that this man has done well from the very beginning."

They discussed the details a little longer, and then Hillary told his chief the story of Nahgoo's adventure, and how he had released him from the coils of the python.

"What was the Gipsy doing down in the thick jungle off the path?" Benacre asked.

"I believe the old man was on his way to the coast to fetch a load of smuggled salt, and he didn't want to meet me lest I should be too inquisitive about his journey. However, he was uncommonly glad to see me in response to his S.O.S. call, for he was in a tight corner in more than one sense of the word."

"Is it possible that he was helping to hide the man we want?"

"I couldn't say, sir. The thought did not cross my mind. The gipsies are hardened old smugglers and pilferers, but they are not inclined to take any serious risks that will bring them into the hands of the police."

"Keep your eye on him and, if you have an opportunity, question him on the subject," said Benacre.

Hillary smiled as he replied:

"I might just as well try to get information out of that old monkey that bosses the colony of wanderoos in the valley that they have appropriated to themselves."

They talked of the rogue elephant and the reports that had been received of its vagaries, its eccentric wanderings, and the mischief it had done.

"I have asked the Gipsy to give me news of it. He is a good tracker, or, rather, has been in his day, I ought to say. He ought to be able to track it down and let me know where to find it. I promised him a reward."

Don had been at work on the estate since dawn. His assistant had taken one side and he the other. Every gang of workers—tea pluckers, weeders, pruners—had been inspected and criticised. The two men met at the lower end of the estate, where land for rubber was being cleared and holed for planting. The inspection had to be done on foot. A motor-car was of no use at all in the absence of roads. Even a horse could not take him to every spot he wished to visit.

He had returned and was resting and smoking a cigarette. A little later would come a substantial late breakfast. Then the tea factory must be visited and the different processes of the manufacture examined, including the firing. A batch can be so easily burnt by a careless tea-maker.

A couple of hours' work awaited him in the office. Afterwards he might possibly indulge in a nap, from which he would be roused by early afternoon tea. Lunch was not required after the late breakfast.

Then if he felt inclined for a little company after his strenuous ten or eleven hours' labour, he might mount his horse and ride off to the club, three miles distant. There he would find not only a cheerful, congenial set of men and women, the men as hard worked as himself, but also facilities for playing lawn tennis, golf, billiards, and bridge.

Having finished his cigarette, Don was expecting a summons to his bath, which he took before breakfast. A clatter of hoofs made him sit up and look out towards the front drive. Two girls were riding up to the bungalow. One stopped short. The other rode under the portico and threw herself impetuously out of the man's saddle on her steed.

She ran up the steps of the portico and into the lounge hall, where Don was sitting.

"Don! Mr. Don! Where are you?" she cried as she passed through the veranda.

"Hallo, Zoe!" he exclaimed, raising himself in his chair.

She caught his hand in both hers.

"Oh! I'm so glad to find you in."

"Why? What's the matter, little girl? Are the stars falling and am I wanted to pick them up?"

"Can you—will you make up a four at tennis this afternoon?"

"I thought Jack Hayward and Billy Onslow were to play with you. You told me so two days ago."

"Billy has let me down badly. He has heard of a tiger or a rogue elephant and he's gone off to find it. Then I've got an extra visitor who has come up unexpectedly to stay a few days. I must have another man in Billy's place."

"All right; I'll come, but you mustn't expect me very early; I've got a pile of work waiting in the office."

"You're a dear! Cut it and let your boss go hang."

Her eyes sparkled. She was always on a pinnacle of exuberance and could scarcely refrain from dancing in her gratitude. Round her neck was a string of pearls. She was very frank about them. To all who admired them she would say:

"Imitation, my dear! I bought them at Woolworth's just before I came out. What's the good of bothering about the real thing when you can get such good ones as these?"

The pearls, false as they were, always sent Don's thoughts back to a certain string of pearls that were not false. Occasionally he allowed himself to wonder where the owner of the pearls might be. A busy society wife, mistress of a couple of houses, one in town and the other in the country, she was probably the leader of a smart set in which he, Donald Oakley, would find no place, whatever his calling might be.

Zoe was in no hurry to end the interview.

"Busy, old thing?" she asked, plumping herself down on the arm of his chair.

"Not particularly. That's right. Sit down, you little grasshopper. You're never still a minute. I wonder if you lie still when you're asleep."

"Don't know. I have lovely dreams. Sometimes I dream about you."

"Oh, do you? That's cheek on your part. I never gave you leave to dream of me."

"If Billy shoots that tiger he's gone after——"

"Elephant."

"—I'll dream about him instead of you."

"That will be very hard on me! And if I shoot the elephant——?"

"O-oh! but you can't! You're no shot; everybody says so!"

"I shall go away if you're going to be unkind!" he said, rising in a pretended huff from his chair.

It was time to prepare himself for breakfast. He was conscious that his bath must be ready by this time and waiting for him.

"Does your mother know that you have come here this morning?"

"No, it will be quite time enough for her to hear the stupendous news when I get home. It will be less of a shock."

"Come along and I will put you up in your saddle——"

"I don't want your help, my dear!"

"—And see you safe off the premises!" he added.

Zoe's companion had declined to dismount and invade a bachelor's bungalow in the unceremonious manner of her friend. Her horse was fidgety. She moved about between the house and the front entrance to keep the horse quiet. One of her turns took her near the kitchen.

Cassim, with the waterman behind him to carry the hot water for the master's bath, came towards the bungalow. He passed close to the rider and salaamed, showing his white teeth under the moustache in a smile. He regarded every girl acquainted with his master as a possible future mis-

ress. It was not with any pleasure that he con-
emplated the contingency of his master's marriage.
Ie was an excellent bachelor's servant in his way,
ut he was well aware that he would not please a
ıdy as easily.

Zoe was on the veranda steps beckoning to her
ompanion to come.

"Here! Estelle! I want to introduce Mr. Oakley
you," she cried. "He is going to make up our
t and play instead of that village idiot, Billy
ıslow." She turned to Don, who had mechanically
ised his hand to acknowledge the introduction
ch as it was. "My friend, Estelle, has come up to
end a few days while the rest of her party have
ne up North to look at the big towns. She joins
em at Colombo."

Estelle, self-possessed as usual, held out her hand
th a smile. Don descended the steps and took it.
ither spoke, and there was no betrayal of the fact
t they had met previously.

He approved. It was necessary that the past should
nain a secret between themselves. Explanations of
kind were impossible. Of course, Estelle had
own all along who he was. She had heard about
ı from the voluble Zoe. There was no surprise,
chaotic shock for her in the meeting. She had
osen the line that should be taken, and she had
opted it immediately, leaving him no alternative
to follow.

He glanced round. Zoe was in the saddle. The pony, as restless as its rider, snatched its head clear of the restraining grip of the syce and capered off.

"It is best like this," Estelle said in a low voice, leaning towards him.

"Quite so," he said, making a gigantic effort to pull himself together. "You may rely on me for following your lead. How long are you staying on the Hills?"

"A week or two. You don't mind?"

Mind! How could she tell that with her unexpected presence it seemed as though the long hidden sun had suddenly burst forth, bringing him light and warmth again, the light and warmth for which his soul had been starving? And yet! and yet!—she was now a wife. How could he bear it? It would be ten times more trying than in the old days when she was free.

She was wearing her pearls. Her riding coat, open at the neck, revealed their gleam and beauty as they rose and fell on her white skin. How they tore at his memory, putting him back on the seat of the car with her by his side! Could he endure it?

"You don't mind!" she had said.

The simple "No!" that he had breathed was scarcely audible. But she had heard it, looked into his eyes and smiled.

With a shake of the reins she followed her companion, but did not attempt to catch her up. Zoe was always more or less in a romping mood, exuding high spirits. The madcap was allowing her pony its head and was wildly galloping along the undulating road at the risk of her neck. No ten yards of the way was level.

Estelle wanted time to think. She wondered how much of her history was known to Don: the history of the last eight months that they had been apart.

Did he believe her to be a married woman?

Don had scanned the papers diligently for the announcement of her wedding. Eliza had said that it was to be in six months' time. It was eight since he had seen Eliza. Of course, it would be a strictly private affair on account of her father's death. Perhaps Estelle had not insisted on waiting the six months. No photographs had appeared in the illustrated papers and no notice in the columns of fashionable doings nor in the record of "domestic events."

Zoe was apparently in a tearing hurry, otherwise a few minutes might have been snatched for letting Don know that she was still Estelle Talbot.

It was with a strange feeling of suppressed excitement that Don, leaving his correspondence to take care of itself, mounted his horse in the early afternoon and rode the short distance that lay between his estate and Mr. Farr's.

Zoe's father had made two good courts for lawn tennis just below the bungalow. They were hard courts and beautifully level, no easy quality to attain on the hills; and the light was good.

Before play began, Estelle found the opportunity of enlightening Don. She went straight to the point in her usual direct fashion.

"It is a pleasure to meet you again, Mr. Oakley," she remarked.

"It is good of you to say so," he answered. "I thought——" He hesitated, and she picked him up quickly.

"Exactly, you thought I must be married. First you heard from me that I had engaged myself to Henry Browne and was going to be married in two months' time. Then Eliza told you that the wedding was postponed for six months, which was correct."

"That was the last news I had of you."

"The engagement was broken off." She smiled deprecatingly. "I—I was very unhappy—after—my father died—I——" She stopped abruptly.

Don glanced at her and his spirits leaped.

"Then you are still——" He paused. She finished the sentence for him.

"Estelle Talbot. You asked Eliza not to say anything of your visit. She told me all about it, not forgetting to add that you were going out to South India. I wrote to your uncle, Mr. James Smith, whom I—whom my father knew, and asked him for your address. When a party of friends suggested that I should join them in a voyage to the East I jumped at it."

Don was moved more than he would have admitted even to himself.

"Then you came out to India—to look me up?"

"Yes," she replied at once. "I was determined to see you again, but under different circumstances. All the time you were with my father you were in a false position. Why didn't you have it out with us and let matters be adjusted on both sides?"

"Then I should have defeated my own ends."

"We could have given you an assistant——"

"Exactly so. Your father would never have tolerated another man in his room. After all, it was a matter which only concerned myself," he said.

"Excuse me; it concerned me also. You forced me into a wrong position. Didn't you feel it when, week by week, I handed you your pay?"

"I am afraid I did," he admitted.

"And when you sat in front of the steering wheel with me by your side giving orders?"

"That had its compensations," he remarked in a low voice, as though he scarcely dared to allow himself to dwell on those memories.

The pearls rose and fell a little more quickly as she responded:

"But the compensations—the drive, the scenery"—she paused for a fleeting moment—"and the fresh air—were never free from the restrictions which you had imposed on yourself. Then I made a supreme effort to escape them. They were unbearable. You know what happened, for I hid nothing. You overheard me tell my father what I had done. It was a mistake. It killed him."

She stopped suddenly. Her eyes were moist and her voice failed her.

"Estelle!" he cried.

The name was echoed from the other side of the court by the impatient Zoe.

"Estelle! Don! Come along! Let's begin. Estelle, you are not going to partner Don. That's my business. Come here; I want to introduce Jack Hayward."

Zoe called all alike by their Christian names or gave them nicknames. She was absolutely without deference and respect. Yet no one could accuse the gay little minx of disrespect. Not a soul, young or old, misunderstood the joyousness that brought a smile to the face of everyone with whom she came in contact. It did the heart good to see and hear her.

Don had been attracted by Zoe, but marriage was far from his thoughts and intention. He enjoyed a "rag" with the sparkling child—"kid" as he called her. She made him forget the dark clouds of the past, which at times seemed to have left their shadows over him permanently.

Zoe's mother, Mrs. Farr, looked on at her daughter's boisterous spirits with occasional apprehension. Don was known to be filling a salaried billet on one of the estates belonging to a syndicate. Even though the salary was distinctly liberal he was not an eligible from a mother's point of view. He had no private means but the few hundreds he had put by. It was all he had to fall back upon should illness necessitate a return to England. Certain it was that no sane man could marry in these days on his prospects.

Zoe had nothing behind her but the love and goodwill of her parents. When she showed a predilection for Don, her mother was quite frank with her.

"It's no use falling in love with Donald Oakley, Zoe darling. He is not a marrying man."

"Why do you say that, old dear?"

"Lest you should be deluded into thinking that he is."

"I am not sure that you are right, mummie," replied Zoe, calling to mind the frequent occasions when a passage of arms passed between her and Don, and they exchanged the merry chaff into which love can so easily creep.

"I am sure, 'dead sure,' as you are so fond of saying, that he is not thinking of taking a wife."

"What reason have you for being so dead sure?" asked Zoe, her curiosity roused.

"Because he has no money; nothing but his salary."

"It's good."

"Not good enough for a careful man of his age to marry on. And remember, dear little daughter, that your father and I have no money. We can do nothing beyond giving you a dress allowance when you leave us for any other home."

"Dear mother, don't you worry. I may seem a silly little rabbit, but I have sense enough to look after my own interests. Don is a first-rate chum, and we will leave it at that."

Zoe played up, chaffed her partners, and called them all sorts of ridiculous names. She challenged them to return her chaff with as much interest as they liked. They were all infected with her good spirits and enjoyed themselves thoroughly. Even Estelle was shaken out of the sombre mood that had overshadowed her after her chat with Don.

There was one fact to which Estelle was not blind. She read it in Zoe's face, her manner, her eyes. In spite of her mother's warning she had let herself go and was in danger of falling in love with Don. Was he responding to the love as well as the chaff? Could he possibly have been taken on the rebound and allowed himself to be captured? It looked like it.

Estelle found herself watching the two and speculating on their intimacy. Perhaps if she had played tennis with him in the old days on equal terms, she might have discovered that there was another Don of whom she knew nothing.

She studied the handsome features she knew so well and tried to trace the valet and footman of her father's sickroom. Now and then, when Don was absorbed in the seriousness of winning the set for the sake of his chattering, mercurial partner, she recognised the careful driver, sounding his horn and studying the Great West Road as he followed its crowded course.

He made mistakes, and Zoe's tongue flashed about him like summer lightning with little pointed witticisms that set him laughing. Estelle had never heard him laugh like that; nor had she ever seen him in flannels. She believed that the fun of the game for him lay in the fact that he was playing with Zoe. It did not strike her that the same laughter and enjoyment would have been provoked if he had been playing with the girls of her acquaintance in the old days.

The tennis ended. Refreshments were ready in the veranda of the bungalow. Hayward escorted her there and found a chair for her. Having ascertained what she fancied in the way of a drink he went to the table to fetch it.

Zoe lingered on the courts to collect and count the tennis balls. She kept Don by her side to help. Their words did not reach the veranda, but looks and actions were not lost. Zoe went over the balls a second time. Apparently one was missing. Don was holding the box. In an impish pet she shook the box and some of the balls jumped out.

Laughing over the accident, if such it could be called, the balls were collected again. The childish game delayed them. When they came up to the bungalow the veranda was crowded with thirsty guests. Zoe took Don by the arm above the elbow and led him round to the back, where they found room for themselves. It was far removed from Estelle, and several figures stood between them.

"Will you play another set?" Hayward asked.

"You must excuse me," Estelle replied. "I want to rest. Think how recently I have been through the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. It has left me as limp as a rag."

He turned away anxious to find another partner. Estelle slipped out into the garden. She passed round the corner of the veranda and disappeared from view. As soon as Don could disengage himself from Zoe he made an effort to find Estelle. He was anxious to have another talk with her. Presently he was captured and included in another set. This time he was Zoe's opponent.

CH. X. THE MONKEYS' VALLEY

NAHGOO slept and rested from sunset to sunrise by the aid of his little brown pill. Nor was he troubled with dreams after his terrible adventure with the rogue elephant.

He came out of his cave and looked up at the sky. The clouds that had brooded over the valleys were rising. He glanced across at the distant heights where he had spent the night under the trunk of the tree. No movement of the foliage on the hill-sides gave a hint that the rogue had come back. Hillary had expressed a doubt as to its return, and Nahgoo was inclined to agree with him.

The Gipsy's mind was busy with the duties of the present hour. He had been ordered to bring a large bundle of firewood to the Oodiya kitchen. It was to be delivered that afternoon. His word had been given and, according to the principles of his race, it must be kept.

The woodcutters who supplied the kitchens of the estates of the district had denuded the jungles of much of the dead wood that was sufficiently dry for burning. It was necessary to go farther afield for stuff that would burn well in the open grates of the planters' sitting-rooms. Although Nahgoo's walking powers were still good, he was not as able as in former times to reach the outlying jungles some distance away. He was obliged to search for wood nearer home, bits that had been overlooked or were difficult to cut out.

The jungle in every direction where it had not been sold for the purpose of growing tea and coffee was free to the hillmen. They were not permitted to fell forest trees, but no one made any objection to the collecting of dead wood. On land that had been sold by Government for the purpose of cultivation the woodcutters were obliged to obtain leave from the owners of the estates. There were belts of jungle left on the opened ground to protect the young plantations.

Nahgoo's cave was just beyond the outskirts of the Oodiya estate, some two miles from the bungalow. He had been granted leave to cut firewood in any of the patches of jungle left, and he had taken it as his right. The forest round the peak was under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department. Here he had no monopoly, but had to share what privileges there were with other woodcutters.

One spot existed to which the hillmen did not care to penetrate. This was the valley in which the monkeys had settled. The woodcutters were not inclined to face the uncertain, capricious little animals.

A man, bolder than the rest, had ventured to climb behind the rocks where they had established their roosting-places. The monkeys had "mobbed" him in a curious fashion, plucking and pulling at his clothing till he had lost everything—turban, loin cloth, billhook, his bag of betel-nut; even the amulet that he wore upon his arm had been torn off. He was pushed and hustled down the face of the rock with bites and scratches till he fell on the flat ground below that was like the bottom of a semicircular arena.

Wounded and scared out of his wits, he fled, stark naked. On report of his rough welcome by the wanderoos, the woodcutters did not venture into that particular valley again.

Nahgoo, with a circumspect glance for ill omens, moved from the cave and took his way upwards to the bazaar from which the estates near by drew their daily supplies. It was a collection of mud huts and temporary market stalls by the side of the road that went over the downs. It provided meat, fruit, and vegetables chiefly, such as met the needs of the bungalows and the estate coolie lines. The market opened at half-past six in the morning. By eleven o'clock everything was sold out. The shops and stalls were swept and shuttered down, and the spot was deserted except for a watchman.

Nahgoo went occasionally to buy curry stuff and native vegetable. This morning he appeared with his bag of coarse sacking. He was in no hurry. Let the lordly butlers, with their gold-laced turbans, their smart flannel or serge coats, their large handkerchiefs flung over their broad shoulders, be served first. They would pay top prices. Afterwards came the estate-labourers' wives, and when everyone was satisfied the Gipsy had an opportunity of picking up what was left at a price that suited his moderate means. The stalls had to be cleared and perishable goods could not be left for sale on the following day. If they were unsold they had to be carted or carried away.

While Nahgoo waited his deep-set eyes wandered round taking in everything. Nothing escaped him. There was the Farr butler swaggering along, with his market coolie behind him bearing a large basket on his head. Another butler was bargaining for some teal and snipe. He took possession of the birds by force, afterwards proceeding to chaffer for them —a long process. Possession was nine points of the law. The unfortunate shikari, who had spent hours marking the birds down and waiting till he could get a sure sitting shot, vainly pleaded for an advance equivalent to a penny on the price offered, which was the current charge in the market. The kitchen-boy had the birds safe within the old tin box which took the place of the large saucer-shaped basket that most of the market coolies carried.

Mr. Oakley's butler, Cassim, walked past. He did not see Nahgoo, who was standing in a group of hillmen, waiting, like himself, for prices to go down, and effacing themselves in the presence of these magnificent domestic rajahs.

Cassim stopped before an old woman who had a basket piled with the rice cakes known throughout South India as appas (hoppers). She glanced up at him, noting his beard and turban. Picking up a white, attractive cake not unlike a pancake piled with vermicelli, she said:

"Very good eedi appa, sir. Same as Mussalmans buying in Madras."

Cassim glanced down contemptuously at the exhibit.

"Do you expect me to eat that stale appa? It is dry and sour."

"No, your honour! I made it myself this morning. It is still warm from the baking. I keep my appas under a thick woollen cloth. Feel it, sir."

"It is cold and sour, I tell you. I can see by its colour."

She replaced the appa on its pile and glanced round for the ayah who usually bought her eedi appas for her little English charges.

"Have you any of the other kind of appas?" he asked.

She took up another of a different make, white and appetising in Indian eyes, and held it out without a word. She did not like the manner of the Oodiya butler.

"I must have some of those, I suppose," he grumbled. "Give me a dozen. Ah! These are fresh."

"They were all made this morning before sunrise from the same flour," she protested.

He flung down the money, and the kitchen-boy, following close upon his heels, took the appas from the woman and placed them under the cloth that covered his basket. Nahgoo watched the butler as he passed on to the meat stall. There he bought mutton.

Cassim spoke to few people. He held himself aloof, and the men of his class were not encouraged to be friendly. He was out only to do the shopping for the house and was not inclined to stop and gossip over it. When he had finished his purchases he went off at once in the direction of Oodiya.

A little later the Gipsy passed the appa woman. She had sold out her stock, including the eedi appas, and was covering her basket carefully with a cloth to keep it free from dust. She held out two appas, they were undersized and burnt at the edges. No one would buy them. Nahgoo received them with a sudden grin of pleasure.

"The Oakley butler, does he buy the eedi appas that the Muhammadans eat?" he asked.

"Never, old father. He always complains that mine are not good. They are as good as any he can get in Madras. I learnt to make them in Triplicane."

"The rice of Malabar is good," he remarked.

She wagged her head in assent, lifted her basket and departed. She salaamed as she turned away. It was wise to propitiate the Gipsy and make him a present of the burnt cakes that she could not sell.

The market was thinning. Nahgoo wandered to the fruit stall. The best of the fruit had gone. On the ground outside the stall was a big bunch of bananas known as plantains. They were black. A bad fall had damaged them. In addition, the wheel of the bullock-cart that had brought them to market must have gone over the middle of the bunch. Nahgoo looked at them.

"How much?" he asked.

The owner of the stall glanced at him. He recognised the Gipsy and knew of his reputation. Nahgoo was holding out a small copper coin. It was not taken.

"You can have the bunch for nothing, old father," he said. "But you must carry away the stalk as well as the fruit."

Again he was propitiated at the smallest possible cost. Nahgoo continued his prowl round the market and acquired a broken piece of green gourd that had been thrown aside as unsaleable. He made a few purchases, put his bunch of bananas on his head, gripped his sack, and disappeared off the scenes.

He stowed away his sack in the cave and started out again with the fruit. He followed the path down the valley for some distance. Turning to the right along the little stream that branched off from the torrent, he arrived at the entrance of the monkey's domain. It was a tropical Garden of Eden, sheltered from the violence of the winds and receiving the light and warmth of the sun from its rising to its setting.

The stream fell in a silver cascade over boulders and spread itself out into a pool near the entrance. A game track led into the arena, but the depression ended in a cul-de-sac from which there was no outlet but the way in. The monkeys had made several tracks on the precipitous face of the rocks, but they were known only to themselves, and were hidden in the undergrowth.

Nahgoo placed his burden on the ground in the centre of the arena. He squatted beside it and began to whistle softly, with a tremulous note like a chirping bird. At once the face of the rock was alive with the little people. They issued from holes and crevices and ran chattering along the ledges, dropping from ledge to ledge till they reached the ground and were on the same level as the visitor.

A young monkey, bolder than the rest, ran up to

Nahgoo and reached out its hand towards the fruit. Its impertinence was rewarded with a tap on the arm from a light stick that the Gipsy had broken off a small shrub. The monkey retired, scolding and baring its teeth, but showing no resentment at its treatment. It understood that it had to await its turn.

A second ran up and seized one of the bananas. Before Nahgoo's wand could reach it a long, hairy arm was thrown round its neck and it was pinched till it squealed; the fruit was wrenched from its fingers. It went off, whimpering like a naughty child. The old wanderoo that had dealt so swiftly with the thief came forward.

The Gipsy's movements were gentle and devoid of abruptness. He held out a bunch of the fruit chosen from the best. The old monkey received it as from a friend and went off by itself with warning growls to the others to keep their distance.

Nahgoo then threw the rest of the fruit about him, tossing some of it to those on the outer fringe of the crowd, distributing it as fairly as he could.

Turning away he followed a track that led to the back of the rocks. He crept quietly round towards the habitations of the little people. Here he found plenty of firewood, which he was able to gather at his leisure. If the monkeys caught sight of him they offered no objection to his presence among them. He was recognised as a benefactor. He looked down at the crowd from the hill-side.

They were still busy pulling the skins and stalk to pieces in search of overlooked titbits.

He did not return to the bottom of the valley, but worked his way up through the jungle towards the cave. He had cut a good deal more wood than he would require. It would be safe where he left it.

He made up his load for delivery, a little over rather than under the regulation weight. He cooked his midday meal, took a short rest, and started for the Oodiya bungalow.

CH. XI. CASSIM, THE BUTLER

DON had been up since five o'clock. He had walked to the bottom of the estate, where he lost the cool breezes of the hills and had the full benefit of torrid heat. He examined the work that was being done in the way of preparation for the rubber planting and then he had climbed up a greater number of feet than he cared to count to the much higher elevation of the bungalow.

He had breakfast, which was later than usual owing to his long walk, and after it paid a short visit to the factory, as he was in haste to get back to the office. The English mails went out the next day. He had returns to make and letters to write.

If they were not finished before tea they would have to be done in the evening.

Don went to his writing table and cleared off some of the papers that required immediate attention. Then he began a letter to his mother. He had missed the last mail and he was determined to write by this. He wanted to tell her about his meeting with Estelle. He had half promised the exacting little Zoe that he would turn up for tennis in the afternoon. It would not do to let her tyrannise, however. She must get on with her tennis without him.

His thoughts flew to Estelle, about whom he had begun to write. He wanted badly to see her again. After his experience at the tennis party he realised that talking to Estelle in private, even on a tennis court, was not going to be an easy matter. He wanted more than a little private talk, and wished himself back on the driving seat of some car with her by his side for a seventy-mile drive. But cars were not much in the way of men living in a hill district. Whatever efforts he made to secure a *tête-a-tête* he would always have to reckon with interruptions from the little grasshopper, as he had called her.

If he wrote to Estelle and asked to be allowed to pay her a visit it must come to the knowledge of Zoe. She would be full of curiosity over the reason for such a request. Why should he want to see someone who was a stranger? To explain would entail admitting a former acquaintance. Estelle had expressed a wish that this should be kept a secret and he had acquiesced.

It crossed his mind that perhaps Estelle sometimes took a walk or ride by herself, but would Zoe allow of this? The kid had nothing to occupy her mind but her own pleasure: a morning ride, a practice at the courts, and in the afternoon tennis again, either at home or at the club.

He sighed; the situation was depressing. After all, if they met, what could he say? It was no easier to ask a woman with a lot of money to marry him than a girl with none. He had nothing to offer Estelle and was never likely to have an equivalent to the fortune she could bring.

He took up his pen and continued his letter, which was not progressing as it should. His attention was diverted by the sound of voices raised in dispute. He put on his hat and strolled out into the garden. Some quarrel was taking place near the kitchen. He turned his steps in that direction.

Near the go-downs, but out of sight of the windows of the bungalow, was a group of people, mostly members of his own household. In the centre of the crowd stood the Gipsy. Don knew him by sight and had a dim recollection of having been told that he was the old jungle-wallah who lived in the cave under the peak, and who had long been privileged to supply the house with firewood.

On the ground lay a bundle of sticks of all sizes. Cassim was in the act of kicking them in all directions while he poured abuse on the head of Nahgoo. The old man was silent and uneasy. Under his uneasiness a dull anger smouldered, the anger roused by injustice. It was the wrath of an uncivilised man who was being goaded and driven to thoughts of revenge.

"What is all this?" asked Don, glancing from one to another.

"This old woodcutter is trying to cheat your honour. He brings wood that will not burn and asks five annas for it. Besides being bad it is under weight."

Cassim spoke in English, which, except for a word or two, Nahgoo did not understand. The Gipsy was confident that the butler was giving the master a version of the dispute that was not correct. Cassim had forgotten for the moment that his employer could speak and understand the language.

"May this humble worm say a word?" asked Nahgoo.

"Yes, and tell me in what way you have given offence to the master of my kitchen. Have you asked too much for the firewood?"

"Your servant has not overcharged, your honour. This is a proper four-anna bundle of wood as served to all the bungalows. It is enough to last two days."

Don looked at Cassim.

"In your daily house account you put firewood down at five annas a day. This old man asks four annas for a bundle that is to serve for two days. His demand is very moderate."

"But, sir, look at the wood. It is soft and rotten and it will not burn," said Cassim, with a blustering manner that might be terrifying in the kitchen but had no effect on his master.

Don picked up the branch of a dead tree and broke it across his knee. There was no trace of touchwood about it. Nahgoo, anxious that all his wood should be tested in like manner, broke up other branches. Don set his foot on a log too large to be broken. The wood was firm and hard and dry.

"It seems all right and quite good for burning, butler," said Don quietly. "We mustn't be hard on an old man."

"I don't like to see my master cheated by this old jungle rat," cried Cassim, his violent temper restrained with difficulty.

"Don't abuse the old man. I am sure that he does his best. What is it that he asks? Four annas? Here it is."

Don held out a silver coin the size of a sixpence, which Nahgoo received with his two hands cupped. He knelt and touched his forehead to the ground at the Englishman's feet. He was up again immediately. Turning, he faced Cassim and gave him an extraordinary glance that did not escape the notice of the lookers-on.

The butler was still too furiously angry to observe anything. His master had not supported him in the dispute. It was outrageous that he, the head of the household, should be treated like this and before all the other servants too. Everyone employed in and about the house had been drawn there by the noise. Benacre's servant, the Paddy-bird, who had strolled over from the camp, was listening with all ears. He knew the Gipsy well and was on good terms with the old man, who had frequently given him timely notice of the presence of small game at one or other of the pools of the valley—wild fowl that might be shot for the master's table.

Nahgoo departed quickly, his lips moving in maledictions that he refrained from pronouncing aloud because of the master's presence. Those who watched him were quite aware of what he was doing, and thanked their household gods that they were not the objects of his wrath.

Don turned away to go back to his letter-writing. As he went Cassim took himself off, vowing vengeance on the old man. He had dared to stand up to him and resist the grinding down of prices by which the butler was filling his own pockets.

The cook and the matey remained to relate the story to the Paddy-bird.

"It is bad for the house when the master interferes," commented the Paddy-bird. "But your butler is a strange man. He does not know his business."

"He is a Mussalman," remarked the cook.

"There are good cooks and butlers among the Muhammadans," said the Paddy-bird wisely.

"What would you have done?"

"I should have paid the old man what he asked. It was the right price. If the wood proved unsatisfactory, I should have told him that it must be made good, and he would have done it. The old man brings me firewood. I always find it correct in weight and quality."

"It frightened me to see his lips moving when he went away," said the matey, the table servant, a timid man, who stood in awe of the butler.

"And his eyes! Did you notice them? They were bad to look at," added the waterman.

"Evil will happen to Cassim. It is a mistake to anger these hillmen, and this one is a gipsy," said the cook.

"And he has been accused unjustly," added the Paddy-bird, "which is bad, very bad. The gipsies may be thieves, but where they give faith they never break it. If Nahgoo makes a promise he keeps it. That is how I have always found him."

At this moment Cassim was seen coming to rejoin the group. He had recovered his temper. The servants were probably discussing the incident and might be criticising himself. The best way to put a stop to it was to rejoin them on pretence of speaking to Benacre's butler. As soon as he was within hearing the cook gave a turn to the conversation by saying:

"Two missies have been up to our bungalow lately. They came riding. Only one got off her horse. She went to look for the master inside the bungalow."

"The horse that the other missie rode was a good one, but it gave plenty of trouble," remarked the syce, who had drawn near.

"Our master does not pay much attention to the missies," remarked the cook.

"He plays ball with them. I have seen him at the club and at some of the bungalows," returned the syce, who considered himself competent to speak as an eyewitness.

"Shuh! that's nothing!" returned the cook.

"These English gentlemen," began the Paddy-bird with authority, "they do not marry unless there is trouble among the servants."

He carefully refrained from looking at Cassim. He had no wish to be thought personal.

"Why should it bring a mistress?" asked Cassim.

"The master has bother enough with the coolies on the estate. Though they have maistries, all their complaints in these days have to be brought to the master's ears. But if the servants give trouble, then he says that he must get a Dorasanee to stop all the bobbery. When there is a good and proper Dorasanee the house accounts are less."

Cassim's eyes rested on the Paddy-bird.

"Can you keep trouble out of the kitchen?"

"I not only keep trouble out of the kitchen, but I have so arranged that the master believes that he is living cheaper and better than any one of the gentlemen he visits."

"You have your gun and the master allows you to use his cartridges," observed the cook with a tinge of jealousy. "You shoot for his table as well as your own curry."

"How have you managed to buy cheap?"

"By buying of the hillmen and village people instead of going to the markets where the stall-keepers cheat and sell dear."

The syce, pleased to be able to hold the audience with information that was news, reverted to the English missies.

"The new lady who has come to the Farr bungalow has pearls."

"So has the daughter of the Farr master," said the matey. He had seen Zoe more than once in the bungalow.

"Pah! those beads she has about her neck are not pearls. The new missie wears real pearls," responded the syce in a superior manner.

"How do you know?" asked the matey.

"I had it from the ayah who told the kitchen-woman, and she told the wife of the Farr syce. They are not beads such as may be bought in the bazaar at Calicut. They are real big pearls and they are worth a lâk of rupees."

The information was startling. It arrested Cassim's and the Paddy-bird's attention. They broke off their conversation to listen.

"What's that?" asked Cassim, his eyes fastened on the speaker. "Pearls worth a lâk of rupees? That can't be so. She would shut them up in a strong safe if they were worth a lâk. She would never go riding in them!"

"The ayah says that the other missie told her the pearls were real and were worth a lâk," said the syce, sticking to his story. "The missie wears them night and day. They are safer on her neck than put away in a box."

Cassim gave a short laugh.

"Get off to your work," he said, dismissing the group. He turned to the Paddy-bird. "I will walk back with you to the camp. Perhaps you can tell me how best to treat that old hillman of the cave. It would be best not to anger him."

"What's done is done," replied the Paddy-bird without farther explanation.

CH. XII.

ZOE GOSSIPS

Don was late for tennis. His correspondence had not progressed as it should. When Zoe reproached him for not turning up sooner at the club ground he laid the blame on a heavy mail which could not be held up. At all costs it must be ready for the runner who would leave in the morning.

"So sorry!" he said. "I thought it wouldn't matter, because you can always pick up a side at the club."

"Some of the other men are late, too," she grumbled.

"Been detained by the same cause as myself. Mail day to-morrow."

"You talk as if you had——" She paused and gave him a mischievous glance in which was a strain of inquisitiveness.

"As if I had what?" he asked idly. His attention was not on Zoe. He was wondering how soon he could get into touch with Estelle. "Do you think I was busy over a long list for the Army and Navy Stores?"

"No, something much more fascinating. A love letter, Don."

She scanned his face, looking for the tell-tale colour that should have betrayed his secret if he had one. He smiled as he read her like a book.

"Not guilty, my lady. No love letters or love anything else for me." There was an odd little strain of bitterness in his words.

"I know what your correspondence is about. You have to report to a parcel of old men who call themselves a syndicate, haven't you?"

He moved restlessly. For the first time he was conscious of being bored. He had a vague desire to shake himself free of the persistent child who clung so closely to his side.

"If we are to play before it gets dark, my little grasshopper, we had better begin. Where is Miss Talbot?"

"Over there on the other side of the ground. I made up a game for her with Jack Hayward and two others."

"And why aren't you in it?"

"Billy Onslow asked if he might join and I said 'Yes.' But I didn't want to play with him so I backed out. He gets troublesome."

"Poor old Billy," said Don. He knew how the wind blew and was sorry for him. Perhaps Zoe would be kinder later on. She was very young at present and would have been better at school for another year; but this her parents could not afford, with other children to be educated.

His eyes searched the distant courts. They were all occupied, and if he had desired to get into a game he could not have done so at present. This fact did not disturb Zoe. The court farthest away held Estelle. She was in the middle of some quick play and it held her attention exclusively. He could see for himself that he would have no opportunity of securing the little confidential talk for which he was longing.

Each day that slipped by was in Don's eyes a day lost. Soon she would be leaving for Colombo to join her party. The programme included Australia and New Zealand. This would remove her out of his reach with a long, indefinite separation.

Zoe was watching her companion. He did not wear his heart on his sleeve, but she could not help noticing that he was preoccupied and only half conscious of her presence. He must have something on his mind. If it was not the love letter she had suspected, what could it be? Possibly something was wrong on the estate.

"You're tired, Don," she remarked.

"Yes, I am," he admitted.

"How's that?"

"I went down to the bottom of the estate this morning, a deuce of a stiff walk taking it both ways."

"Why didn't you ride? You've got one of the best horses in the district."

"I was obliged to go over rough, steep ground where we are opening. I followed a game track, but I had to take a coolie with a billhook to clear it in places. I shall have it cut out when the jungle is felled. I dare say it did me good." He sighed. "Let's find a seat."

He moved on and made straight for a couple of garden chairs placed in such a position as to give him a view of the court where Estelle was playing. She caught sight of him and waved her racket by way of greeting.

"Anything wrong when you got there?" asked Zoe.

"Where? I beg your pardon. I am too tired to think. I had forgotten what we were talking about.

The new rubber opening, of course. No, I found everything going on all right. Your father, who has seen it, says it is going to be a great success. My company is lucky to have that strip of land running down right into the low country. There was a time when the land at the foot of the hills was not supposed to be of much use, but since rubber has been exploited the opinion has changed."

Estate gossip bored Zoe. She was too young to understand how the interests of every planter were bound up in the development of his land.

"Did you get your forty winks after breakfast?"

"Missed my snooze, worse luck! I was late home from the new clearing. Directly after the late breakfast I tore off to the factory, where I had a big break of tea on. When I got back I settled down to my English mail."

"That was wrong, quite wrong. Daddy says that if a man doesn't get his forty winks after late breakfast he's a worm for the rest of the day."

Don did not reply to her trivial remarks. He leaned back and studied the distant court. Suddenly he remembered his companion.

"I say, Zoe, wouldn't you like to get into a game? There's just time before dark."

"Don't want to play with anyone but you," she returned with a petulant shrug of the shoulder.

"Oh, come now; that's too silly! Look! They seem to have finished over there. Let's go and find out what's doing."

He jumped up and walked away with the determination that he would somehow join Estelle and detach her from the other players. Zoe offered no objection although she saw no necessity for leaving their comfortable seats.

Progress was not easy. With the courts occupied there was no possibility of taking short-cuts across them. Zoe knew that they had very little chance now of getting into a game. It would only be by the retirement of a player who wanted to go home early. She had spoken the truth when she said that she had no desire to play with anyone else but Don. It was his company she wanted and intended to retain. If he had arrived in time she would have secured a court. Failing that she preferred to attach herself to his side. A strong vein of obstinacy enabled her to maintain her purpose. She was, perhaps, wilfully blind to the fact that he would have been relieved had she left him to his own devices.

On her appearance at the courts without her second man, Billy Onslow had proposed himself as a substitute for the absent Don. Zoe had accepted him and then upset all his hopes by backing out of the game. She found another girl who needed no pressing to take her place.

Then Zoe had hovered about refusing all invitations to play, and as soon as she caught sight of the tall, flannelled figure, made straight for him. He was captured before he learned that the game in which he should have played was in full progress. She imagined that she was keeping her little secret to herself, but predilections cannot be hidden in social gatherings.

Estelle was sorry for the child. She could see that Don was not attracted except as a good-natured man might be to a bright, lively little person who amused him. Billy Onslow perceived which way the wind blew and was determined to cut Don out. He felt sure that he had only to bide his time and all would come right. Don was dimly aware that the little grasshopper was becoming too fond of his company, but he was too much troubled over his own affairs to worry himself over " the kid's " fancies.

By the time Don and Zoe reached the court where Estelle was playing the four had changed over and another set was in full swing. They were playing now against time. Twilight comes on quickly with the setting of the sun in the tropics. Estelle would have been glad to have dropped out, allowing Zoe to take her place. Anyway, Don and Zoe were both too late to cut in, for which he on his part was not sorry.

Again he seated himself, chairs being numerous, and Zoe placed herself next to him. He was silent. His eyes followed the familiar figure in all the movements of the game. Two or three times they exchanged a fleeting glance. Estelle must have been blind indeed if she could not have read the desire in his eyes. It was reflected in hers. The old mutual understanding was there, but an explanation was needed. They were no nearer to it than when they parted. He would wait patiently until the game was finished. Then he would walk straight up to her before she could be appropriated by Jack Hayward or anyone else and boldly suggest a stroll. Meanwhile Zoe's tongue was going like the whirring of a grasshopper's wings.

"I see you admire Estelle's playing. She handles her racket well, but she has no staying power. Soon gets tired."

"How long has she been at it this afternoon?"

"We arrived at half-past three and sent the car back for father. We had tea here."

"Then Miss Talbot has been playing for nearly two hours. It's too long."

"I can play for three hours and not turn a hair."

"You are seasoned and in good form from living on these hills. You ought to have taken her place in this last game."

"We were late in getting round to this side. We might have turned Jack out for you. He would have been quite contented. He is very much attracted in that direction, as you probably observe."

"Oh, is he? I hadn't noticed it."

"Well, you may take it from me that he is. In my opinion it would be a jolly good thing for both of them if they made a match of it."

"Why do you think so?" asked Don, as if he was not in agreement with the suggestion.

"He has money and so has she. He is working on his own estate. At any time he could afford to put in a man and go honeymooning to the ends of the earth with a wife if he liked."

"And what has Miss Talbot to say to your nice little plan?"

"Call her Estelle. It sounds so stiff speaking of her as Miss Talbot. Estelle would, I am sure, jump at him, only she is too prim and proper to let it be seen. She's years older than I am."

Don smiled. He knew Estelle's age.

"She keeps her secrets to herself," he said.

"Or tries to do so, but we all know of that affair with Henry Browne. He was a horrid man, and she should have turned him down at the very first."

"Oh!" grunted Don, who appeared to be absorbed in following the play. Zoe continued to gossip.

"Henry Browne didn't care a tinker's curse about her, but he knew that she had money, or her father had, which is much about the same thing. It was the money he wanted, not Estelle, although he was prepared to take her thrown in, like the proverbial pound of tea."

A short silence ensued. Don was feeling more and more uncomfortable as the gossip about Estelle was poured into his ears. If he could have put a stop to it he would have done so. To have walked off might have been a way out of it, but Zoe would have followed.

"Don, don't you hate and loathe a man who marries for money? I do."

"It isn't done nowadays among decent people." He clapped his hands in applause and cried: "Well played, Miss Talbot! Well played!"

Zoe moved impatiently. She was beginning to feel that she had given up her game for nothing.

"Don't shout at Estelle like that. You will make her nervous and put her off her stroke," she said, with an unusual touch of temper.

"She wants encouragement. She ought to play a bolder game."

Zoe let the comment pass and continued her story.

"The odd part of Estelle's engagement was that all her friends declared that she did not care for him any more than he did for her."

"The chattering little minx!" thought Don. He continued his criticisms of the game.

"That was a good rally on Billy's side. What's the name of the girl who is playing with Billy?"

"Claire. She has lately come out to India."

"Miss Claire is a strong player. Is that her surname?"

"She's one of the Hendersons. People said that Estelle lost her heart to some impossible bounder miles beneath her. She 'fell' hopelessly for him. Her father cut up rough and ordered him out of the house. Then she lost her head as well as her heart, got reckless, and accepted Henry Browne. As soon as her father died she broke it all off. Jack will console her——"

Don sprang to his feet. He could bear it no longer.

He did not accuse Zoe of malice. She was only repeating the gossip of older women that she had overheard. Zoe was ignorant of the fact that he and Estelle had met before. She had no ulterior motive in retailing all this. She was under the belief that she was entertaining him and keeping him at her side.

"Where are you off to, Don?" she asked, disturbed by his desire to break away and leave her.

"I believe I ought to be getting home," he said desperately. "There's that confounded mail to finish."

"Oh, don't go yet. You have plenty of time. Wait till the game is over."

He stood irresolute, and while he hesitated, unwilling to leave without a word with Estelle, the set ended. The four players came towards them. Billy made a bee-line for Zoe.

"Hard lines, Zoe! You gave us the slip. You asked me to partner you and I came on purpose. You let me down."

She giggled self-consciously and was just a little ashamed of herself.

"It's good for you to be let down now and then or you would get too beany."

She turned to look for Don. He had escaped her at last, to his relief, and had joined Estelle. Zoe moved forward with the intention of linking up again, but this time Fate, in the shape of Jack Hayward, was too quick for her. He had placed himself on the other side of Estelle and was begging her to come inside the club-house, where he would get her a cocktail.

CH. XIII. DON SHOWS ESTELLE THE SOUTHERN CROSS

THEY walked towards the club-house with a crowd of other players. The light was fading fast, making it impossible to continue. Most people were satisfied with their games and not sorry to turn into the warm, well-lighted rooms.

Zoe, with Billy on one side and Claire on the other, followed the first trio as closely as she could. But Billy hung back and was not to be hurried against his will by his impatient companion.

"I had a great adventure, Zoe, down in the forest. I've been wanting to tell you all about it."

"Oh, I know! I heard. You went after a tiger. Did you get it or did it get you?" she asked flippantly and without any of the sympathy he was looking for.

"It was a rogue elephant I was after; not a tiger," he replied in an injured tone.

"Did you find it, Mr. Onslow?" asked Claire, all eyes and ears.

"I came across its tracks. I never saw such a trampling as it had made. I am told that it tried to get the old gipsy who lives in the cave under the peak. Might as well have tried to catch a monkey I should say!"

"Then you didn't see the elephant after all. How disappointing," said Claire, genuinely interested in his story. "Do tell us all about it."

"I am afraid I haven't much to tell you about the elephant. It had left the place and gone south. I hear that it has been doing a lot of damage forty or fifty miles away. It has killed another man. He was working in his sugar field. He had no idea that the brute was near him. It rushed at him unawares, caught him by the waist, and threw him among the canes. It trampled all over the field screaming with rage, but couldn't find him. The poor fellow had just strength enough to crawl into a deep, narrow drain, where he was hidden. But he was badly hurt and he died. Someone living on that side of the valley will have to shoot it, unless it pays us a visit."

"Is it likely to come back into these jungles? I shouldn't like to meet it when I'm riding," said Claire with a shudder. "I am sorry you had no luck."

Billy wished that Zoe would say something of the same sort. He resigned himself to his fate and turned to his sympathetic listener.

"I had my reward, my compensation. On my way back through the jungle I came upon a leopard, a beauty. It crossed my path. I think we were both rather surprised. I had evidently disturbed it in its afternoon sleep. You know how they enjoy snoozing on a warm slab of rock in the sun like a big tabby cat. Instead of bolting into the jungle and doing the vanishing trick, it stopped and gave me an ugly look. I believe it snarled."

"I wonder it didn't charge down at you."

"I didn't give it time to take the initiative or I shouldn't be here to-day to play tennis and tell you the story. I was too quick for it."

"And you killed it! Oh, Mr. Onslow! I congratulate you!"

"I mustn't take too much credit. It was an easy shot, and I killed it outright with the first. I was anxious not to spoil the head or the skin. I am going to have it set up by a good man. Hayward can tell me of someone. It is my first leopard and I am proud of it."

He glanced again at Zoe, but did not meet with the approval and praise which he considered he deserved. He was not altogether happy about it. However, he had found someone who could fill the gap. He intended to see more of Claire Henderson.

They were arriving at the refreshment tables set out in the big central room. Servants were in attendance to execute the orders given. Hayward was busy securing two cocktails, one for himself and one for Estelle. Don, who had not been playing, refused to drink. He was watching for his opportunity. It came as Hayward's attention was diverted to the cocktails.

"May I have a few words with you after this?" he asked in a low voice.

"If we can manage it. I am dependent on Mrs. Farr," she replied.

It seemed as if they were all at cross-purposes. Zoe had lost her sparkle and was looking and behaving like the spoilt child that she was. Billy was turning to Claire to mend his sore heart and seek for the sympathy that he fain would have had from Zoe.

Hayward was trying to interest Estelle in himself, his estate, and the sport his seven years' residence on the hills had given him. It was not easy, and he knew that he had only half her attention.

Don was silent and moody, uncertain of himself and what he really wanted to say when the opportunity came for the few words. What was to be their import? To what were they to lead? No amount of talking could alter the circumstances of their positions, which, after all, were very similar to those under which they had met previously.

In one respect there was a difference. They were now on an equality, which before they were not. Financially they were as widely separated as when he was her father's companion and valet. He was without money. She had plenty.

That chattering child had put it in a nutshell and obliged him to face the music. Zoe's words had haunted him ever since.

"Don't you hate and loathe men who marry for money?"

And he had replied: "It isn't done by decent people."

A man passing through the room called to Hayward.

"Jack, come and join in a game of 'slosh.'"

Hayward, whatever his intentions might be, was aware that at the present moment he was "cutting no ice" with Estelle. He was quite ready to leave the crowded field and trust to better luck on some other occasion. A hearty consent was flung at his friend, and he turned to take leave of Estelle.

"Good-night, Miss Talbot. You will be off with Mrs. Farr soon. If I don't see you again to-night will you ride over to my bungalow some morning with Zoe? I should like to show you my trophies. I had them set up by a London man and they are worth seeing. I think I have shot every beast, great and small, that is to be found in these jungles except an elephant."

She rose from her seat, promising that she would fix a day. Don relieved her of the empty glass. They moved from the refreshment buffet to make room for the people who were coming in.

Estelle gave Don a glance and he followed her. Zoe's little face was in her glass. She had not refused Billy's offer of the seductive cocktail. When she turned to look for Don after a hasty expression of thanks to Billy, she missed him from their party. She concluded that he had gone to find his horse and get home as quickly as he could. At the club it was not necessary to take leave as in a private house.

It was not until ten minutes later that she noted Estelle's absence. Had Estelle moved away with Jack? If so, all the better. Zoe had not heard the invitation Jack had given. Billy, by his attention to Claire, had succeeded in rousing Zoe out of her indifference. Although she might flout him occasionally, she did not wish to see him carried off before her very eyes by a mild little person like Claire. So she had allowed her interest to be awakened in his exploits, and he had the joy of telling his tale again to the two girls as they sat one on each side of him.

Donald and Estelle slipped out into the dark, starlit night. The air was cool and beginning to have a nip in it. They strolled along tongue-tied. There was so much to say and so little time in which to say it. The ache in their hearts had something to do with the silence. They were drawn together, but held apart by the barrier her father had created. The fortune that was now hers had been built up at the expense of every humane and generous instinct. The price the old man had paid for it was not discovered till, through an over-strained, weakened brain, he lost all power of self-control. Then only was it realised that the good which should have been in him was atrophied and killed by the curse of amassing wealth.

Estelle was waiting for Don to speak. She was unconsciously longing to hear the words that must be trembling on his lips:

"Estelle! I love you! I love you!"

And she was more than ready to respond: "I love you, Don, I love you. I have loved you from the time you stood up to my father and protected me from his violent words."

But speech would not come and he was dumb. When at last he found his voice it was to ask a trivial question.

"How long are you staying on the hills?"

He felt choked, as if his throat was full of sawdust, and it was with difficulty that he brought his voice under control.

"Perhaps another week," she replied. "I should like to give myself a few days in Ceylon."

She partly divined what was troubling him, but she was ignorant of the cause. She was wondering if he was free. During the interval of their separation he might have created ties that held him back from the confession of love that she craved.

Believing that with her approaching marriage and his own departure for India they would never meet again, he might have brought some other woman into his life, who would come out to him in course of time and occupy the bungalow to which Zoe had taken her in their morning ride. As he remained silent she continued, hiding her nervousness, which was not decreasing.

"My party went on to the big towns in the north, as I think I mentioned. I have heard from one of them, an old friend who persuaded me to come."

Again she paused. She could not study his features in the dark. She could only partly guess at the turmoil of his mind. She was becoming more acutely conscious of the wide gulf lying between them. A sense of disconnection was driving them even still farther apart. In the old days when they sat side by side on the driving seat of the car there was a closer contact than they felt now. Zoe's words rang in his ears:

"Don't you hate and loathe a man who marries for money?"

If he married Estelle the whole world would accuse him of having an eye to her wealth. Love might be there, but love could not alter the circumstances.

Estelle continued talking. She felt that safety was only to be found in speech, no matter how trivial it might be.

"We shall go on to Australia. It will be some time before I reach England. Are you thinking of taking a run home next year?"

"Not yet; but I shall see you again before you leave for Colombo?"

A note of despair rang through his confused words. It roused her pity and made her desperate to break through this iron-bound restraint that he seemed to have laid on himself. She remembered those months of service he had given to her father, his patience, his endurance, his chivalrous protection of herself. Her heart went out to him. She laid a hand, the trembling of which he could feel, on his arm.

"Don! Don!" she cried, and her fingers closed in a tight grip above his elbow. "What have you to say? You did not bring me out into the garden to study the stars. We have only these few minutes together."

The point of contact had been suddenly reached by her action. In a moment she was in his arms, and their lips met in the long-delayed kiss that both had dreamt of. How much was in it they did not realise all at once. They had lived for it, been born for it, and now it had come, bringing relief and a curious sense of happiness.

"Darling! I have found you at last. Oh! how I have prayed for this; that we might understand each other," she whispered, her lips against his ear.

He did not reply in words. At that minute came the high-pitched voice of the whirring grasshopper.

"Estelle! Estelle! Where are you?"

They drew apart, and as they did so Zoe almost ran into them in the dark.

"We are off home." Then, seeing that Estelle was not alone, she said: "Is that you, Don? I thought you had gone long ago."

"I am just going. Now, Miss Talbot, you will know where to look for the Southern Cross, won't you?"

His voice had recovered its natural tones and his manner was easy. Zoe's presence was enough, even in the dark, to enable him to pull himself together. Estelle followed the line he gave.

"After your lesson in astronomy I am sure I shall be able to find it," she said with a joyous little laugh.

"I could have shown you the Southern Cross," interrupted Zoe. She was annoyed with herself for not having kept a closer eye upon him. "Don, we are coming to call on you again before Estelle leaves."

"Yes, do. I shall be very glad if you will."

"We want you to take us to see that old Gipsy who lives in a cave on Oodiya."

"He isn't actually on the estate. His cave is under the peak in the forest reserve."

"Can he tell fortunes? I should like to have mine told."

"I never heard that he could. He doesn't know English and you wouldn't understand him if he did tell your fortune. When will you come? To-morrow?"

"I half promised that I would ride over to Mr. Hayward's to see his trophies," said Estelle.

"Splendid!" cried Zoe in warm approval. "They are worth seeing, but not to-morrow. We will make it Monday or Tuesday, if that will suit

Jack as well. Come along, Estelle. Mummie is all ready to go home. Good-night, Don. Sleep well and dream of your little grasshopper."

He did not follow them, but moved away from the house towards where the syces waited. His head was in a whirl. His heart thumped till he thought he could hear it. The bliss of that unexpected moment had been exquisite, but already it was bringing retribution.

Cold common sense was asking questions. What now? Where have you landed yourself?—and her? Have you surmounted the barrier that for you is insurmountable? No, it still stands rigid as ever.

You have rifled the nest and placed a sacrilegious hand on the miraculous golden egg that the bird of happiness has laid. You cannot keep it, you cannot hold it.

Can you ask her to marry you—you, a penniless planter?

"Don't you hate and loathe men who marry for money?"

"It isn't done among decent people."

CH. XIV. A CHANGE OF RULERS IN A JUNGLE TRIBE

NAHGOO had not forgotten the bundle of firewood left in the jungle near the monkey rocks. More must be gathered and the whole delivered at Oodiya with a bit over. He had roused the ill-will of Cassim by behaving in such a manner as to bring the master on the scenes. It was exactly what the old man intended when he raised his voice in protest. The butler knew it. Nahgoo would not fail in fulfilling his part of the bargain, and his faggots should be up to the full weight, whether he received the full price or not.

At the same time the Gipsy would not forget the butler's attempt to cheat him. If the opportunity came he would seize it to pay off old scores and have his revenge.

Nahgoo was busy in the early morning light preparing his breakfast. He made a fire outside the cave. The blue smoke from the burning wood curled upwards towards the mists that were floating away from the peak. He placed a pot on the glowing embers of the fire. It contained rice. When it was cooked he drew off the water known as congee, in which it had been boiled, peppered and salted it, and drank it for his breakfast.

The rice he rolled and squeezed into a shapeless pudding, which he wrapped in green leaves and placed under his blanket to keep warm. Without haste, and as methodically as the best cook in the world, he tidied his improvised kitchen, hiding his cooking pots in a recess inside the cave. The packet of food taken from the blanket and still steaming was placed in his old sack. With it he put in the coil of rope that he used for binding his faggots. The sickle-shaped billhook was stuck in his belt; he was prepared to spend the day in the forest.

He left his cave as an animal moves from its lair, looking round for any other creatures that might be on the prowl. He had the action of a dweller in the jungle, setting down his unshod foot with as much caution as a cat. Very rarely did a twig snap under his hardened sole or a loose piece of rock become detached and kicked out of place by a careless toe.

He followed the path for a little distance and then took an indistinct game track, avoiding the line on which he had encountered the python. In places the track opened out in glades, where the walking was easy. Here the sun reached the ground and called to the balsam and begonia to put forth their blossoms. Then the path dived abruptly into the forest and almost disappeared in dense jungle. The hills were broken into innumerable ridges with valley and gorge on each side. No one but an experienced woodcutter or a wild animal could trace these tracks. They all led indirectly to streams and pools where the animals could drink.

Hillary, coming up the valley towards the peak, caught sight of something moving on the hillside. He had his glasses as well as his gun. They revealed the figure of the Gipsy going in the direction of the monkey rocks, for such he took to be the destination of the old man. He noted the care with which he passed from one covering shadow to another, scrupulously avoiding any telltale disturbance of the foliage that would betray his presence. What was the old man after?

Hillary considered the matter for a minute and came to the conclusion that his method of progression might be only an instinctive habit adopted from a long life in the jungle.

When the woodcutters from the hill villages went to gather firewood they moved freely, often crashing through the undergrowth and taking no pains to avoid the snapping of the dry branches. Nor did they attempt to deaden the sound of the sharp, resounding blows of their billhooks. The prowling leopard would sneak away to its rocks and the snake to the lush vegetation at the noise of the chopping of wood by a human being.

Nahgoo might possibly be on some secret errand which he did not wish to be known. Was it smuggling? It could hardly be that, for he carried only a sack, and that was not half filled.

Hillary stood on a turn of the path and waited till the old man was visible again. Then he hailed him with the woodcutter's call. The Gipsy returned the challenge and emerged from the shelter of the bushes. Hillary signalled to him to come to the point where the stream branched off from the torrent and flowed down to the valley of the monkey rocks.

"Where are you going, old father?" asked Hillary as soon as the Gipsy joined him.

"To cut firewood, your honour."

"You were going towards the monkey rocks."

"There is plenty of firewood on that side. The hillmen keep away. The monkeys are too full of mischief and give them trouble."

"And you? Aren't you afraid of them?"

"They know me and they have plenty to tell. Many years I have known the old father monkey."

"You know their language?"

Nahgoo wagged his head in assent.

"What have you got in your bag?"

"Master can see for himself. Only your poor old servant's dinner and the rope to bind the firewood."

He opened the bag and displayed the contents. It was as the Gipsy had said, and Hillary could find nothing that was contraband. He had no comment to make.

"You have heard that we are looking for a murderer who is hiding in these jungles?"

"The servants in the kitchens speak of it."

"Perhaps they know where he is." Nahgoo did not reply. The Inspector watched him narrowly. "Have you seen anything of him?"

The Gipsy paused for a perceptible second, as if considering his reply. Hillary's suspicions were raised and he said:

"If you know that he is here in these parts you must tell me. There is a heavy penalty for helping men to escape who are wanted by the police."

Nahgoo shifted from one foot to the other, evidently ill at ease.

"This worm does nothing to shut the eyes of the police," he said.

"But you are sometimes glad to keep out of my sight."

The old man did not deny the implication. He left the subject alone and asked if the murderer was a young man.

"He is middle-aged, neither young nor old."

"He is a Muhammadan?"

"No, a Hindu." A sudden thought struck the Inspector. Behind the question was a sly suggestion. "It isn't Cassim, if that's what you are thinking of. The Oodiya butler is no friend of yours, I have heard, and he tried to cheat you over the firewood. But we don't want a Muhammadan. Our man is a Hindu."

Nahgoo's eyes shone and his grey, bushy eyebrows drew together in an ugly scowl. Hillary needed no telling that the old man bore ill-will towards Oakley's butler. But he was not going to allow himself to be drawn into the absurd belief that the man, who was definitely described as a smooth-faced Hindu from Bombay, could turn himself into a bearded Mussalman from Triplicane in Madras.

"If I find him I will let your honour know." Nahgoo turned the conversation from a subject that made him feel uncomfortable to one that he was confident would interest the Englishman. "The rogue elephant is still giving trouble."

"So I hear, but it is a long distance away."

"It will come back, your honour. It has a devil that drives it from place to place to kill and destroy. May I take my leave?" asked the old man, who was anxious to get to his morning work.

"Have you heard that there is a reward for the capture of this man?"

Nahgoo wagged his head in assent. He had learnt it from the bungalow servants. It was sufficiently large to loosen any man's tongue.

"The man must be found and pointed out to the police in such a way that it will lead to his apprehension. Of course, you can give us information if you have any suspicions, but there must be some foundation for us to go upon. It is a Hindu we are after belonging to the Vishnuvite sect."

Nahgoo listened without comment, and when the Inspector had ended he trotted off with his sack and small water pot, disappearing in the direction in which he was going when he was arrested by Hillary's call. Something about the Gipsy's manner puzzled the Inspector. Was it his own dinner he was carrying or did he intend it for someone else? He was half inclined to follow him, but he might just as well try to track a jackal. He thought better of it and decided to carry out his original intention, which was to pay a domiciliary visit to the cave. With Nahgoo out of the way it would be a good opportunity to do so now.

He continued his climb to the cave. It was a gigantic fissure in the great mass of rock that formed the peak. The floor was fairly even for a considerable distance. Towards the end it became rough and full of uneven recesses. At the extreme end the fissure narrowed into a slit.

Nahgoo lived in the front part for the sake of light and air. Hillary made a rapid survey and searched the place thoroughly. He used an electric torch. Its light revealed the various household treasures of the old man, his charpoy and blanket, some loose bits of firewood, and his cooking pots. There was no sign of a lodger.

The Inspector left the cave and passed along at the base of the peak by a track that would take him down the hill without bringing him too near the monkey rocks. From long residence near the jungles he had learnt to tread almost as noiselessly as the Gipsy himself.

Suddenly his steps were arrested by the sound of a voice. Someone was talking in low tones. A second person was replying, not with words, but with the grunts that signified attention and agreement. Two woodcutters having a pow-wow over their wood-cutting, he thought.

On any other occasion he would have been content with the explanation and would have passed on. Remembering the man he was looking for, he stopped and turned aside. He knew by sight most of the hillmen who frequented the forest and would be able to tell at a glance if one of the speakers was the criminal. Alert and cautious, he crept towards the spot from which the voices came. He found himself looking down through the undergrowth at a curious scene.

Forty or fifty feet below the spot where Hillary stood Nahgoo was squatting on a slab of rock. By his side lay the old monkey. It was extended at full length, too weak to lift its head. Its grey fur was patched with blood and it was badly bitten.

The Gipsy was talking to it as if it was a human being. Now and again it responded with the grunt familiar when uneducated Indians converse. Hillary could not catch what the Gipsy was saying or whether there was any intelligible articulation. Whatever it might be it seemed to soothe the invalid.

The parcel of food had been opened and the rice was lying, still warm, on the green leaves in which it had been wrapped. The Gipsy made a small portion into a ball, such as he would have put into the mouth of a child, and offered it with the gentle movements that inspire confidence in wild creatures.

The monkey was too far gone to eat. He poured a little water on to one of the leaves and held it like a saucer on the palm of his hand. With the other he lifted the monkey's head as he might have raised the head of a dying dog. It lapped feebly from the leaf and sank back exhausted.

Again Nahgoo spoke soothingly and offered it rice. At any other time it would have been an acceptable morsel, but now it was too late. The wanderoo looked at its benefactor with the eyes of the old dog that has been a lifelong friend of its master, as though it would ask forgiveness for refusing what in former days had been a treat.

Its breath was coming in gasps and its chest heaved with the laboured breathing. The end could not be far off. Nahgoo took out his precious ball of dope, pinched off a small portion, and put it between the old monkey's lips. The treacly taste was acceptable, and its lips moved as it sucked at it. Presently its eyes closed, the breathing became less laboured, and it fell into a sleep from which it would not awaken.

It was a pathetic sight. Hillary crept away, absolving the old man from all complicity concerning the murderer. He had done him a wrong in suspecting that he was carrying food to the fugitive. There must have been a long friendship between the two, the Gipsy and the wanderoo, such as exists between a dog and its owner; and Nahgoo knew that he was losing an old neighbour with whom he had been on good terms and that he would miss the animal.

With the curious instinct common to wild animals the monkey had been conscious that its end was not far off. After a terrible fight with a younger animal for mastery it had withdrawn itself from the rest to this secluded spot, where its last moments would not be disturbed. Nahgoo, aware of the conflict and knowing the ways of the monkey tribe as well as he knew the habits of his own people, had sought it out and done what he could in its last hours.

As Hillary passed near the monkey rocks to continue his search he heard an unusual commotion in the colony. He kept out of sight, as the little people invariably scolded at him if he carried his gun. With his glasses he studied their movements. They were running on all-fours up and down the face of the rock cliff, jumping into the trees and back again on to the rocks. They took flying leaps in all directions, as if seized with an epidemic of hysteria. Their tails were extended and curled at the end. He thought at first that they were fighting, but though they screamed and barked and growled themselves hoarse they were not fighting or struggling with each other. They were under some strong excitement, and at first he could see no reason for it.

Then with his glasses he noticed a young monkey sitting in a prominent position on the rock just outside the particular hole lately occupied by the old one. It was the same animal that had presumed to help itself to the bananas and had been collared and deprived of its mouthful by the leader. It turned its head from side to side growling and showing its white teeth. It grasped the rocks as it sat as though prepared to spring on any one of the troop that disputed its right to the hole that it had appropriated. Now and then it seized the stem of a bush growing within reach and shook it violently.

It was taking upon itself the leadership and giving the colony to understand that it looked for submission and intended to exact it by force if it was not duly rendered. There was no sign of rebellion. Not a single young monkey showed fight or disputed its assumption of authority and leadership. As it sat growling at its fellows it seemed to be sending out a challenge and intimating that it was ready to try conclusions with any other monkey in the troop. Although they were all at a high pitch of excitement not one of them offered opposition.

The reason for this aggressive attitude was that on the previous evening it had driven out the veteran. It had warned the old wanderoo off the premises and entered into possession of its domain.

Ill, and not far from death, the old leader of the troop required no force to expel it. Wounded and with failing limbs it crept away to the spot where Nahgoo found it. After all, the incident only followed precedent and repeated history. In the days of its youth the old wanderoo had made itself master of the tribe by brute force and it had maintained its position in a similar manner ever since.

The wild beasts that live a community life in the jungle are conservative and have a primitive method of self-government. Under the same system that deposed the old monkey, the rogue elephant was driven out of the herd. Its leadership was wrested from it by a younger and stronger beast.

The Gipsy, himself conscious of failing powers and inability to keep pace with the rest, had separated himself from his tribe. He had retired voluntarily. He had not been driven forth by force. His fate would be much the same as that which had overtaken the wanderoo. He would one day be too feeble to go abroad and carry his burden of sandal or firewood through the forest. He would be unable to prepare his food. Death would overtake him when no one was nigh to pour water into a green leaf that he might moisten his parched lips.

Nahgoo rose to his feet and bent over his little brother of the jungle. It was unconscious. For the first time, except for lifting its head, the old man ventured to touch it. He laid a hand on its shoulder and then on its forehead. There was no shrinking away. Animals living wild in the forest very rarely allow themselves to be handled. The eyes remained closed and there was no response.

He rolled up the uneaten rice and departed. The work he came out to do had yet to be accomplished. He made his way to the monkey rocks. The surplus firewood was there. He set about binding it into a faggot. A grunt attracted his attention. He glanced round and recognised the new leader, the young one that he felt sure would succeed the old. It was watching him from behind a bush that only partly hid it. He finished knotting the rope and laid the bundle aside. He seated himself on his heels facing the monkey. They were about twelve feet apart.

After five or six minutes the Gipsy took out the parcel of rice, unrolled it, and displayed the tempting delicacy. He pressed together a small ball and jerked it into his own mouth. The monkey watched the rice greedily as it disappeared. It moved restlessly and whimpered like a dog that begs for food. Nahgoo made up another ball of rice. Instead of eating it himself he dropped it on the ground a short distance away.

Gaining confidence by his gentleness the monkey ventured to emerge from the shelter of the undergrowth. A paw was extended towards the ball of rice and drawn back. Nahgoo began to whistle with the soft tremolo sound that he had used to summon the old wanderoo. Recalling the way in which it had been treated when it ventured to help itself to the bananas before the old one had been served, it glanced round nervously, prepared to do battle this time if the other should appear. Nahgoo continued his invitation and the monkey, gaining courage, advanced. He picked up the ball and threw it to the monkey. It was caught and eaten with satisfaction.

The rest of the food was offered in the same manner. Occasionally a mouthful was consumed by the Gipsy, but the greater part fell to the share of the animal. When the rice was finished Nahgoo moved quietly away carrying his wood. The monkey seized the green leaves, to which a few grains were still sticking, and licked them with delight. Like the dog that is never satisfied when it shares its master's dinner, it sniffed the ground and grubbed with its fingers for scraps that might have been left. A little later it returned to the rocks, entering the recess that was from thenceforth to be its nest. The excitement was over and the little people were quiet again, composing themselves for their midday siesta in the sun.

Circling in the sky was a pair of vultures already arriving to perform the funeral obsequies of the late wanderoo.

CH. XV. DON IS NOT AMENABLE

SUNDAY was a day of rest and recreation with the planters. They were all strenuous workers for six days in the week. On the seventh they felt themselves entitled to spend the day as they liked. Those who lived within reach of the church showed no inclination to shirk their religious obligations.

It was not every Sunday that the chaplain—the padre, as he was called—could come and give them a service. Due notice of his intended visit was sent round and his congregation rallied about him with all the goodwill in the world.

Those who had cars and could connect up with the road had no difficulty in getting to the church. It did not matter if the distance was five or twenty-five miles. Others who lived a few miles from the road had their horses. Some of them came from estates far away. They thought nothing of the long morning ride through magnificent primeval forest by winding bridle paths which the woodmen often had to cut out afresh. The service was at eight and over by ten o'clock.

Zoe drove her father and mother in the little car that, as she said, would go anywhere and do anything. She looked forward to the church-going and the fun of meeting the concourse of people gathered first at the church door and afterwards in the beautiful garden that surrounded the building, where people lingered to exchange greetings before starting for home.

Hearty invitations were given to those who came from a long distance. Some had already received them. Lone young bachelors were only too thankful to be bidden to the late breakfast, where they would find themselves in an atmosphere that reminded them of sisters and mothers. The bachelor's bungalow in India is a very different affair from the well appointed house presided over by a kindly, sympathetic hostess. The single man who lives by himself may be comfortable enough, but he can never bring his servants into line with those of the Englishwoman.

As a rule Don attended the service regularly. Zoe was aware of this and looked confidently for his figure in the group of men who would presently troop into the building. She had invited Estelle to take the fourth seat in the car, but when she begged off Zoe did not press her. Her refusal left a vacant seat available for a chance guest. If Zoe's parents did not find a friend to fill it, she intended to capture Don and bring him back.

But in this respect Zoe was destined to be disappointed. Don was remaining in his bungalow. He had his reasons. After what passed between him and Estelle at the club he dared not trust himself to meet her again.

They had kept their former acquaintance secret. People supposed that they had been recently introduced on her arrival on the hills. As such they must continue to pose if they wished to avoid raising curiosity and evoking questions on Zoe's part.

Don had slept very little during the night. His brain was in a chaotic condition. At first he had been lifted to dizzy heights in a dream of happiness. Gradually the exaltation passed leaving him suffering acutely from the reaction. Towards the morning he fell into a heavy sleep from which he woke under a cloud of depression.

He began to consider the situation in another light and to criticise his action. He had done wrong in giving way to the impulse of the moment. He had lost his head. He had compromised her, taken her by surprise. In that moment of madness he had put an end to their friendship and substituted nothing in its place. How could he excuse himself for such a lapse?

He wondered if she regarded the incident in the same light as himself. What attitude would she adopt when they met? She could not ignore what had passed nor set it aside as too trivial to remember. At her touch he had taken her in his arms abruptly. His manner was almost rough. He had held her in a passionate grip that betrayed long-repressed emotion.

She on her part had made no effort to extricate herself. On the contrary, she had let herself go and had rested in his embrace with a sigh of content as though she, too, had at last found the moment for which her soul had so long hungered. She had met his lips with an unpremeditated readiness that told its own tale and maddened him. She had returned his kiss.

Over and over again he reconstructed the event. He felt her yielding body in his arms, her lips moving on his. A thrill amounting almost to a shudder went through him as the recollection returned again and again.

The end had come suddenly, with no word of explanation. Zoe's voice had fallen on their ears. They had drawn apart and spoken inanely of the Southern Cross.

He felt a strong urge to rush off and pour out his love. Hereditary restraint held him back. He must not dare to see her again. What he ought to say refused to be spoken. It would have to be written. He must make her understand that marriage was impossible under the circumstances between the heiress and the pauper. He would not attempt to soften the statement, but would put it baldly, even brutally, as it would appear in the eyes of the world.

No decent-minded man would ask a woman in such a case to marry him, he would tell her. Then he would apologise and beg for her forgiveness. Clearly and definitely it must be understood that they could not meet again. It would be a great strain for them both, for he knew now that she loved him.

He seated himself at his writing table and took up his pen. Bracing himself to his task, he began:

"Estelle darling, I dare not see you again. This must be——"

The pen dropped from his fingers. He clenched his hands in the agony of his spirit. He could not bring himself to write that fatal word "Good-bye" with which he intended to finish his sentence. It meant a parting for ever. He flung his arms out over the sheet of paper, the arms that had held her only last evening. His head was bent low and his eyes closed.

The sound of horse's hoofs trotting up to the bungalow startled him. He pulled himself together. This was some neighbour wanting company. Disinclined for church, he had come on the chance of finding Don in, and ready to welcome him to breakfast.

A woman's voice hailed him. He rose and went out into the veranda. Estelle was dismounting from her horse. She was alone. The reins were flung to the syce with an order to lead the animal into the shade and wait. She would not be long.

"Don!" she cried, mounting the steps. Both hands were extended in greeting. "I felt that I must come and see you to talk things over."

"You are very kind," he stammered. "I had just that moment sat down to write to you."

He did not invite her into the sitting-room, but pushed up one of the veranda chairs and drew another close to it. There was more safety against his own rashness in the veranda, which was open to the garden, than within the four walls of the house.

They seated themselves in silence. She turned to him with a searching glance. This was not quite what she had expected. He was white, and his face bore lines upon it that she did not remember having seen in the old days. In his eyes was that expression of pain and misery which only comes with mental anguish.

"You are not well, Don. What's the matter?" she asked.

"Repentance, bitter repentance for my madness last night," burst from his lips.

"Madness do you call it? Oh no, dearest, not madness. I have another name for it."

Her voice grew soft and her eyes shone with a light that set his heart beating.

"Don't, Estelle!" he prayed, like a man who was being sorely wounded.

"But I must speak if you won't!" she protested.

He raised his hand as though he would check the words on her lips. He caught his breath and spoke:

"Let me say what has to be said." He gripped the arms of the chair in which he sat in his effort to control himself. "I owe you an apology for what I did."

"I don't want an apology!" cried Estelle in distress. She was puzzled. This was not what she had hoped for. "I didn't ride over here to ask you for that."

She paused to give him time to collect himself. It was for him to seize the opportunity offered to declare his love. He seemed unable to speak. A horrible fear assailed her.

"Do you wish me to believe that it was all a mistake?" she asked.

"A mistake! Yes, a dreadful mistake!" he replied, catching frantically at the word she had put into his mouth. "I had no right to——"

"You mean," she interrupted, "that you have engaged yourself to another woman? Of course, I ought not to be surprised to hear it. You would only have been following my example." She leaned towards him, trying in vain to read his face. "Don, are you engaged?"

"It isn't that," he cried. "I have never asked any woman to marry me. I have never loved anyone but yourself."

"Then in the name of Heaven what is this mysterious obstacle that you imagine stands between us?" As he hesitated to reply she continued with increasing emotion: "Tell me. I must know. I have a right to know."

"It is this. You are rich. I am poor. I have nothing to offer any woman. I am utterly unable to keep a wife."

"You foolish boy!"

The denial of the existence of any obligation on his part to marry someone else was an intense relief. Her spirits rose, and she could have laughed but for the misery in his eyes.

Estelle was not of an hysterical nature. She was no longer a girl, like Zoe, fresh from school. She was a clear-headed, sensible woman, who had lived a lonely life, with her mother dead and her father absorbed in money-making. She had been obliged to think out the various problems of her life and to act on her own initiative without consulting others. She had come out to India with the express purpose of solving this problem of her own marriage. One day when she had accomplished her end she would tell Don all about it, and they would laugh together over her effrontery in deliberately seeking him.

For the first time she was troubled with misgivings. After all, it was not going to be as easy a matter as she had supposed.

"We must thrash this question out," she said in a business-like tone. "It is possible that we may not at first see eye to eye. We may differ on a point or two, but things can be straightened out."

"It is not a question on which we can argue. The circumstances cannot be gainsaid. They exist in all their crudeness, and it is impossible to alter them," he replied.

"The circumstances as you call them are these, I take it: I have eighty thousand pounds—I am sorry to be so brutally plain-spoken——"

"And I have my salary and a miserable two thousand pounds, a sum of money that would not purchase one-quarter of those pearls that are round your neck."

The pearls were moving tumultuously under her quickened breath.

"And if I chose to give you half my fortune?"

"Could I take it? Could I be the recipient of your charity? Where would be my self-respect?" he demanded.

"Oh! get away with your self-respect and come down to reason!" she cried with a flash of impatience. "Are we both to be made miserable for the rest of our lives because you haven't sense enough to see your way out of this difficulty?"

"There is no way out of it," he cried hotly.

"I don't agree with you. There must be a way if we could only find it."

"I see no other than the one I have mentioned. I am to be your pensioner for the rest of my life," he said, his temper rising, a rare thing with Don, as she knew by experience.

"You are giving matters a hard name," she observed quietly.

"I am only stating facts as they are." She was silent, and he continued: "I will not be dependent on anyone. I will have no wife till I can offer her a decent home. I will remain single—for your sake, Estelle. No woman shall enter my life. It is sacred to you."

"Then give it to me! Give your life into my keeping!"

He rose from his chair, unable to face her longer.

"Don!" she cried, holding out her arms to him.

He turned away, unable to bear the strain of refusing her invitation. She was making it very hard for him to follow the lines he had laid down for himself.

"Don!" she cried again, moving a step towards him.

His courage failed him. He could not stand against her pleading any longer. He must either yield or take refuge in flight. Blind with misery, he staggered into the sitting-room, leaving her in the veranda. He dropped into his seat by the writing table. Again he flung his arms out, and his head was lowered till it rested on the sheet that bore the words "Estelle darling!"

The syce, on being ordered to take the horse into the shade, led it to the tree nearest to the kitchen. Hearing the sound of hoofs, the cook came out to see what visitor had arrived at the bungalow. Having ascertained, he went to the room occupied by Cassim.

The butler had removed his turban. His head was covered with the skull-cap that is usually worn under the turban. He caught up the turban and hastily assumed it.

"The missie with the pearls has arrived at the bungalow," said the cook.

"When did she come?"

"Just now. Her horse is here. I have spoken to the syce, who is waiting under the tree. Shall I make some coffee or tea? Will the master call for it?"

"Have the kettle boiling. I will find out if it is wanted."

Cassim buttoned his coat and adjusted his turban. He went to the syce.

"Is it the missie who wears the pearl necklace?" he asked.

The syce wagged his head in assent.

"What has she come for?"

It disturbed Cassim to have these English ladies visiting his master. This was the sort of thing that led to marriage. A mistress was the last thing that he desired.

"To see the master."

"Did she call for me as she rode up?"

"She went straight in without calling. He met her in the veranda. They are sitting there talking."

Cassim dared not intrude. He must wait till he was summoned before venturing to show himself.

"Are the pearls your missie wears ever laid aside in a box?"

"The ayah says she sleeps in them."

Cassim remained silent. The voices in the veranda ceased presently and the English missie came quickly down the steps. She signed to the syce to bring up the horse. The butler advanced also.

"Shall I make tea or coffee for your honour?" he asked.

"I can't stay. I must get back as quickly as possible, thanks."

The syce held the stirrup and she was into the saddle at once. Don, coming to his senses, sprang from his seat and hurried into the veranda. He was in time to catch sight of her as she urged her horse into a rapid trot up the path leading to the road.

As he gazed he was filled with remorse. He had driven her away. He had refused the gift she had practically offered of herself. He had excluded her from his life. What could this be but a lifelong misery for himself as well as for her? Fool! Yes, fool that he had been! What was money compared with love? Surely between them they might have adjusted matters as she had asked. She was ready to do so, but he—he had turned her down.

Cassim returned to his go-down.

They were pearls, real pearls that the missie was wearing, and he had seen them for himself. The ayah was right when she said they were worth a lâk of rupees.

He sat deep in thought until the cook warned him that the master's breakfast was ready and waiting to be served.

CH. XVI. MR. JAMES SMITH APPEARS

ESTELLE was not easily discouraged. If things went crooked she was always ready to postpone the discussion of a subject until conditions were more favourable. Apparently she had not chosen a favourable moment with Don. She must contrive to see him again. She was in sympathy with the proverbial warrior who preferred to resume the fight another day. Her heart did not sink at the prospect. The knowledge that he loved her gave her courage, even though she was discomfited for the time being and compelled to run away.

She hustled her horse along and arrived at the bungalow in good time to prepare for breakfast. The church-goers would not be back for another hour.

She entered the grounds and cantered to the veranda with the panting syce at her heels. As she ran up the steps someone came out of the lounge hall to meet her.

"Mr. Smith!" she cried joyously. A more welcome sight could not have met her eyes.

"Uncle James, my dear, please. To you I am Uncle James."

"Then I suppose you want a kiss. But that won't make me your niece."

She caught her breath in a little sigh, which did not escape his notice. He gave her a keen glance.

"Out with it, Estelle. What's the matter now?"

She did not answer his question. She only shook her head as though she was facing a difficult problem, which was indeed, the case—an obstinate, unwilling lover.

"Men are difficult creatures to manage."

"Quite so," responded Smith. "It began with Adam. It comes down to you and Don. Do tell me if things are going on favourably."

"They are not—but first I want to know about yourself. How did you get up here? I thought you were touring through the northern towns with the rest."

She seated herself, glad to seize the opportunity of securing a private talk with him before the rest of the party appeared. He drew a chair near to hers and settled himself down to tell his own tale, which was short, and to hear hers afterwards.

"I got dead sick of the company and that awful Mrs. Johnston." Estelle laughed; she had seen something of the lady's pursuit of the rich bachelor, and was aware of what poor Uncle James had suffered at her hands. "I made a bolt of it, and told the conductor of the crowd that he wouldn't see me again."

"No peace for old bachelors among the petticoats."

"And not much peace for the young ones either," he rejoined. "I intended all along to cut the last week of touring and look in on Don. It is good to be back again on these hills and go over the old ground. I am now more than half the syndicate that owns the estates. That boy is making an uncommonly good thing of Oodiya. His breaks of tea have steadily gone up in price and seem likely to remain up. I've bought out two of the five and I am chairman of the board. That gives me a free hand to do pretty well what I like."

"And what is it that you are going to do, Uncle James?"

"I want to make Don boss of the whole group with men under him of his own choosing. A thousand a year is the salary that I propose the syndicate should give him."

He looked at her with a questioning eye.

"It's a very liberal offer," she said.

"It's only the proper price for the head of a company's group."

She did not reply. She knew nothing of the tea industry. The details did not come her way. She had no interests in its production. He looked at her with a question in his eyes.

"It is good enough for him to marry on," he said.

"That's for him to say."

"On the contrary it's for you to say, and I shall tell him so when I see him."

"Now look here, Uncle James, once and for all, if you and I are to keep good friends, you are not to put your finger in this pie," she said.

"Oh, and why mayn't I take a hand in it?" he asked combatively.

"It is not going to be an easy matter."

"All the more reason why I should help."

"The position is difficult," she remarked.

He glanced at her, a sudden anxiety crossing his mind.

"Anyone else in the way?"

"No, thank Heaven," she answered with a readiness that allayed any doubt that he might have had as to the existence of an intervening entanglement.

"Then what's the matter? Why can't you both go full speed ahead?"

"He is still in love with me——" She found it just a little difficult to make the confession.

"That's good," he said with hearty approval.

"—but he has mounted the high horse and—and he may be riding for a fall for both of us."

She told him of her visit to Oodiya that very morning and how she had begged off going to church that she might see Don. She had hoped that the result of the interview would be an understanding that would pave the way to an engagement. She was sorry to have to admit that she had failed.

"I was actually bold enough to invite him to propose to me."

"And do you mean to say that he didn't follow it up on the spot?" cried Smith. It was difficult to believe her tale. He was afraid that there had been some misunderstanding. More than ever he was determined to "put his finger in the pie" as she had termed it.

"He turned me down remorselessly. Wouldn't listen to anything I urged. He told me that I was an heiress and that he was not going to be my pensioner. That's how he put it. My pensioner!"

"Bless the boy! Just like him. Stuck all over with principles like a porcupine with quills. He gets that from his mother, not from me," Smith assured her, as though Don had exhibited some inherited vice.

"Wherever he gets them, there they are, and I shall have to deal with them," remarked Estelle, her pertinacity peeping out, to Smith's satisfaction.

"I must talk to him."

"You will do nothing of the kind," she said with a determination that restored Smith's confidence. "As I told you just now, you are not to take a hand in this affair until I give you leave. You will only upset the apple-cart. I can wait."

"We'll see. I shall go over to Oodiya this afternoon and he must put me up for a week."

"Did you let him know that you were coming?"

"Haven't said a word. I didn't want to be told not to come. How much do these people here know of this affair?"

"Nothing. I didn't think it necessary to mention the fact that Don and I had met before. It would have involved telling them the whole history of our former acquaintance. The story would have been the property of the whole district. No secrets are kept among these dear, open-hearted people. I would rather it was between ourselves, you and me and Don."

"Then where are we exactly?"

"You and I have known each other for many years, that is to say you were acquainted with my father. We chanced to be on the same trip. You happen to be Don's uncle, but that is no affair of mine. Being interested in the estate you have come up to see how he is getting on and to look after the property."

"That's all right so far as it goes," he acquiesced.

"You can't be his uncle and mine too. We must defer that little relationship and go back to the ordinary proprieties of friendship."

"H'm! I suppose you know best, my dear."

"I assure you that it is necessary," she said with a touch of anxiety. Uncle James was not good at plotting. He preferred a straight, unequivocal path.

"Well, all I can say is, it beats me to understand how it is that Don hasn't had you in his arms by this time."

"He has!" she confessed with a rising colour.

Smith gazed at her with uplifted eyebrows and laughed.

"The young dog! What became of his confounded principles for the moment?"

"I don't know. He has been trying to make me believe that he forgot himself and that it was all a mistake."

"I shouldn't mind making just such a mistake myself," said Smith with amusement and appreciation. "When did it happen?"

"Only last night at the club. We had a few minutes to ourselves, and we went out into the dark to look at the Southern Cross."

"You give me a chance of looking at the Southern Cross!"

"You're an old dear! and you're Don's uncle.

Perhaps Don will allow me one day to show you the Southern Cross if you don't make a mess of things. This morning I went over to Oodiya, as I told you, for the express purpose of letting him have the opportunity of repeating it, but his principles wouldn't let him."

"I can't think what's the matter with the boy," said Smith, puzzled by what he considered was the unnatural behaviour of his nephew.

"It's all the doing of this money. It did my father no good and it seems probable that it will do me no good. If I am not careful it will put an end to my happiness. Uncle James, I can't live without Don!" She jumped up from her chair with an abruptness that startled him. "And what is more," she continued, "I won't live without him. If his principles can't be conquered, my money will have to go."

"That's bad. I must take you to Monte Carlo, the only place where you can get rid of a fortune respectably."

"I would rather not use a short-cut like that to accomplish my purpose. We are meeting on a different footing from formerly. I don't see why I should not be able to overcome his scruples if I am given time to do it."

"If not, we must bring pressure to bear upon him."

"No!" she cried. "No pressure, as you call it. We have done with all that kind of thing. The men and women of the present day want an open field and a fair fight."

"And if he continues obstinate?"

"Then perhaps you shall have an innings. But, mind—no unwilling husband for me, if you please."

"I can't imagine any decent fellow unwilling where you are concerned," he declared, looking at her with undisguised approval. "The stay on the hills has done you no end of good and put some colour in your cheeks——"

She threw her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"That's good-bye for the present to Uncle James. After this it is to be Mr. Smith."

"All right, little girl, I shall understand."

She ran off to her room. He stood looking after her.

"I won't butt in till I am wanted. I don't know that I could do any good if I did. If I offer to give him my interests in Oodiya—and I can afford it—how do I know that he won't turn me down too with some rot about charity? Confound his pride. He's just like his mother, who prefers to be as poor as a church mouse rather than take a little brotherly assistance from me."

He prowled about the hall and the veranda as he tried to master his excitement and calm himself down by the time his old friend Farr appeared on the scenes.

NOTHING can exceed the hospitality of the planter in the East: It is no grudging welcome that he gives the expected and the unexpected guest. Whatever the accommodation of his bungalow may be—good, bad, or indifferent—it is put at the service of the guest. There are no hotels within reach, and it may be this fact that stirs the kindly soul of the exile when the visitor comes knocking at his door; or rather, to be accurate, enters the veranda with a happy assurance that he will be welcome. It may be that the planter is so deadly tired of his own company that he is ready to take in anyone who will gossip about the big world from which the other has been so long excluded.

Smith had made his way up to the Farrs' bungalow confident of a welcome from his old friends. He had sent no word of his advent. He was not asking them to put him up. He intended to spend the day and go on to Don.

Business was behind his visit to his nephew. He had various matters to discuss, the centralising of the group of estates, the enlargement of the Oodiya bungalow in view of Don taking a wife, and the improvement of the tea-house.

The old man had set his heart on bringing Don and Estelle together. It had been his doing that she had appeared on the scenes. With the help of Don's mother he had long ago discovered how things stood. He had persuaded Estelle to accompany him on the trip to the East. Then he had written to Mrs. Farr reminding her that the girl she had known in England would be passing within reach. The invitation was the result.

He made sure that the two would meet and come to a satisfactory understanding. He had no son. Don was his only nephew and would be his heir. While Smith was marking time with the touring party in the north he had looked daily for a letter from Estelle setting his mind at rest. He became impatient and decided to go and see how matters were progressing. Hence his appearance on the scenes a little before the time he had fixed in his own mind to look up Don.

It was an intense disappointment to hear from Estelle that the little romance which he fancied he was engineering himself had not prospered. He was slightly irritated at finding Don such a backward lover. Smith had a due regard to money, but he had no sympathy with the moral scruples that were causing Don to lose sight of his own happiness as well as that of another person. Money would be coming to Don in time. Smith would make settlements himself if they were needed. But they were not needed at present. Estelle would refuse them if she were consulted. If she had been endowed with three hundred a year instead of three thousand all would have gone smoothly. In his disappointment he was inclined to join with Estelle in cursing old

Talbot's móney, in that it was likely to bring her no blessing.

He had a long talk about tea production with Farr, who confirmed him in his opinion that Oodiya and the other estates might profitably be developed. Smith did not mention his nephew's private affairs as he meant to keep faith with Estelle. All that he heard from his old friend encouraged him to carry out his speculation, and he was going to Don with the full intention of seeing it through.

Don was spending an unhappy Sunday. For the first time in his life he was doubting the wisdom of his own actions. He had always prided himself on being decided, knowing his own mind and ready to act without misgivings. He was troubled with doubts that were not far from being regrets. A dozen times since Estelle had left him with an abruptness that was startling, he cursed himself for a fool. Yet in thinking it over he reminded himself frequently that he had no alternative but to refuse her love.

Then came the memory of the evening before. She had given herself to him and he had accepted the gift. This morning he had gone back upon his own deed. He had been false to the dictates of his heart, and tried to superimpose the dictates of his head.

He had the bungalow to himself; no one called. He could neither read nor write nor sleep. The sound of a motor-horn set his pulse going. He recognised the note. It was Zoe. She was the very last person he wished to see. Her flippancy in his present mood would be intolerable.

If she brought Estelle it would only add to his embarrassment. A wild impulse took possession of him to rush out at the back of the bungalow and take refuge in the jungle. Before he could commit himself to any action, rash or otherwise, he was reassured by the sound of Farr's voice.

"Hallo, Oakley!" he cried cheerily. "Where are you? I have brought a visitor for you."

Don hastened out to greet him. Zoe's father was a less disturbing person than the daughter, and welcome at any time. To his astonishment he found that the visitor in question was no other than his uncle. Smith smiled, and held out a hand.

"I have kept my promise, Don," he said. "When you left England to take up the appointment here, I said I would come and look you up, and here I am."

Farr refused to stop. He transferred Smith's suitcase from the car to the veranda.

"I must be off at once," he said as he took leave of them. "I promised that I would drive my wife and the girls to the club. I can't disappoint them."

He hurried away, leaving nephew and uncle regarding each other, the elder with a twinkle of the eye, the younger feeling that a cloud of depression was being lifted from his mind. The prospect of having a companion was cheering, someone who knew him intimately and who might give him advice, if he could summon up his courage sufficiently to ask for it. All he could say, however, was a commonplace greeting.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, Uncle James. It is good of you to come all this way just to pay me a visit."

"I have also come on business, I must tell you. You can put me up for a few days, of course. If I remember right, you have plenty of room in this house."

"Plenty and to spare," was the rejoinder.

He called Cassim and gave the necessary orders.

"You haven't anyone living with you—your assistant?" asked Smith, who was anxious to have his nephew to himself.

"No one. My assistant is an Anglo-Indian who much prefers to have a bungalow to himself. He is in the little building that is between this and the coolie lines."

"I remember. He's a married man, of course, and has a family. That's what you ought to be, Don. It's dull work living alone on these hills."

Don did not reply to his uncle's remarks on marriage. He busied himself at the drawer of the writing table in which he kept cigars. He offered his uncle a box.

"Ah! a real old Trichy!" said Smith as he helped himself. "Like old days, this is! How the time flies."

They settled down to a chat, Don more pleased than he would have admitted to have someone to distract his thoughts. They were in the sitting-room, furnished with comfortable lounges, a couple of bookcases with books, a smoker's table, and Don's writing table. His physical comfort was provided for, but his mental comfort was not so easily secured.

The kitchen-boy was already lighting a fire of wood on the open hearth. As soon as the sun sank the air on the hills grew chilly. A fire was a luxury, not a necessity. The sight of it was cheering if nothing else. Smith was enjoying it, and while he smoked his thoughts went back to the past.

"I came to this district directly after the war," he said presently.

"On a pleasure trip?" asked Don as he paused.

"No, on business. I wanted to see if tea was going to recover. If so, it was an opportunity to invest which I meant to take. I was commissioned by four friends to act for them. They had money to lay out, too. Oodiya was in the market and two other estates. You know them."

"And you have done well with them," said Don.

"Very well. I have bought out two of the men, so I have a big holding. Tell me about Oodiya and what you have been doing."

"To-morrow you must go through the books and see for yourself."

They talked until dinner-time. They dined and talked again. All the time it was shop. No personal affairs were touched upon. His uncle's reticence did more to restore Don's balance of mind than anything else.

"My colleagues and I are well satisfied with results," said Smith at length.

"You have every right to be as far as Oodiya is concerned," replied Don, his pride in his work bringing a glow of happiness to which he had been a stranger ever since Estelle had come for a second time into his life.

He was an early riser; his work demanded it. He suggested that his uncle might like to retire.

"You want to go to bed," said Smith, who was familiar with the ways of planters.

"When you are ready."

"Give me five minutes more while we are on the subject," said Smith, filling up his glass from the siphon. "You have been so successful over your tea-making that we propose to put you in charge of the whole group. We will give you a free hand. You may engage your own staff and sack those who are not in your opinion up to the mark."

"That would make everything easy—if I took on the job."

"And why shouldn't you?" asked Smith in surprise. He thought his nephew would have jumped at the offer gratefully.

"The question is, Am I good enough?"

"If we think you are, it is not necessary for you to doubt it. We consider that you have proved yourself efficient by what you have done on Oodiya."

"I haven't been long at it, and it would be against my principles to take on——"

His uncle exploded for the second time that day against his nephew's attitude. It had a tendency to priggishness, a characteristic for which he had no toleration. He spoke out plainly:

"Oh, confound your principles! Leave them for your mother. They belong to her age. I agree with the American who says that 'A kind Providence fashioned us holler so that we might our principles swaller.' Take my advice and swallow yours."

Don laughed. He had never heard his uncle on the subject of principles before.

"Of course you will accept our offer," said Smith decisively, and disposing of the question without further discussion.

Don murmured his gratitude and Smith went on to explain what he wanted done on the estate.

"We are prepared to spend money where it is necessary. If you can get the leaf in from the other estates we will enlarge the factory here. We are ready to open out as you are doing and make additions to other buildings. If you want any improvements in the bungalow they can be included in the estimates."

Don was beginning to catch some of his uncle's enthusiasm.

"It would be a splendid thing for the property to centralise. It is what 's wanted on all these estates. We have to contend with the distances and the difficulty of transport. Your estates lie near enough to centralise. We could work with more economy."

"It's up to you to make it pay. I was to ask you in the name of the syndicate—we are only three now and I am chairman—if you would accept the post of superintendent of the group of estates at a salary of a thousand pounds a year."

Don gasped, but he said no more about principles.

"You need not give me a reply to-night," Smith continued. "Think it over if you like before you decide."

"I suppose you will want me to sign an agreement?"

"It's usual. We shall ask for a three-year agreement, to be renewed on expiration if we are mutually satisfied. It's a lonely life, but that you won't mind, or you can remedy it. You are used to it by this time."

Smith rose with a good, wholesome yawn.

"Now I am off to bed. I shall sleep like a top in this wonderful air. Good-night, Don."

He went away smiling to himself at his success. He had not mentioned Estelle's name from beginning to end. Yet he flattered himself that a good stride forward had been made in the direction of the fulfilment of his hopes.

IT was the following morning, Monday. The sun had risen over the tableland. Nahgoo's bundle of firewood was heavy. He had reached a point where the path forked. The left branch continued up through the forest reserve till it met the road on the plateau. The path on the right led to Oodiya, passing through a belt of jungle belonging to the estate. The track entered the grounds near the kitchen, avoiding the bungalow.

The Oodiya jungle, as yet untouched by the planter's axe, was beautiful in its primitive state. Huge trees sent up their columns into the sunlight, testifying by their growth to the fertility of the soil. The undergrowth was green and luxuriant, and beneath was the carpet of ferns and plants running riot. It was not only in one spot that Nature was so bountiful. For miles and miles of untouched forest slopes, trees, bushes, and plants extended in lavish tropical growth.

The Gipsy had permission to clear away the dead wood. He seldom availed himself of the privilege. The entire staff of the bungalow, with the exception of the cook and the butler, who used the master's fuel, drew their supplies of firewood from that particular piece of jungle. Nahgoo found it more convenient to go farther afield, although it entailed more labour.

He put his bundle down and sat at the junction of the Oodiya track with the public path. He was waiting. Like the wild animals of the forest, he knew how to wait when he had a purpose. The sun had not climbed over the peak when Hillary came up the valley. He greeted the Gipsy cordially.

"Hallo, old father! So you had my message?"

"And I am here according to your honour's orders."

"Have you any news for me? We have reason to believe that the man we want is hiding in this forest. Do you know if this is so?"

"This poor old man has seen nothing in the jungle but the deer and the little people."

Nahgoo lifted his load and poised it on his head. He folded the sack he usually carried—this time empty—into a pad to protect his skull from the rough wood. Some of the branches were long and unwieldy. It was an unusually ragged faggot, unlike the old man's neat bundles. Hillary glanced at him as he balanced his load and prepared to continue the journey.

He could not divest his mind of the suspicion that the Gipsy knew something that might be of use. If the fugitive was hiding in the vicinity of the cave he did not see how the knowledge of his presence could escape the vigilance of the old man. He questioned him closely, passing from one subject to another in the hope that he might catch him tripping.

"You are going to deliver that wood at Oodiya?"

"By your honour's favour," was the reply. "It is an order given by the butler. If master is walking that way, this worm will be glad to tread in his shadow and listen while he speaks."

"You would like me to come round by the bungalow on my way to the camp?"

"If your honour will grant the favour."

It was a cunning suggestion, and Hillary thought he knew the reason for it. If he was present when the wood was delivered, the correct price would be paid and the old man would not be cheated out of half the sum due. It was small enough, but no sum is too small to escape a docking in India when it is due by a superior servant to an inferior.

Having cross-examined the Gipsy, the Inspector's object was to consult with his chief on the expediency of increasing the patrols on the roads to the seaports. The chance of taking the fugitive in the forest itself was not good. There was too much cover. On the highway it would be more difficult to hide. Even if the fugitive succeeded in finding shelter from his pursuers, he could not stay indefinitely in hiding. To reach the coast he must use the highway.

They walked, Hillary leading; Nahgoo followed slowly. Hillary glanced round at him and did not envy him his load. The old man might have made two journeys and delivered half at a time, a far less arduous task, although it involved a longer tramp.

The distance between Oodiya and the cave was not great, but the path was steep in places. Not only was the load heavy but it was unwieldy.

"Why are you bringing up such long branches?" he asked.

"The cook asks for them long. By pushing the sticks up as the ends burn, it is easy to keep the flames alight."

"I see; take care not to come too near anyone with your sticks. They would give a nasty blow."

"I will be careful. Your honour must speak before stopping, and then this poor man will not run into the great police master."

They tramped along the path Indian file, Nahgoo with long strides, the Englishman with a heavier tread. Occasionally the Gipsy stopped to get his breath. Hillary, good-natured with man and beast, waited till he was ready to resume the journey.

The Inspector had made friends with three or four of these old men of the forest. He had found them of use when he had required information about the dwellers in the jungle. In another part of the district there lived a Kurumba with whom he had long been on good terms. The Kurumba was regarded as a magician by the hillmen. They were afraid of his hypnotic powers. These powers were said to be hereditary. When exercised they had curious effects that were difficult to account for.

Hillary continued his way to the kitchen and go-downs. On either side of the buildings were trees that cast a welcome shade when the sun was high. The bungalow was opposite to the little square. It was connected with the kitchen by a covered way to enable the servants to reach the house in wet weather dry and in comfort.

Nahgoo stood behind Hillary, the bundle on his head. As he turned to look for the cook and the butler, the long branches swung round like the flying sails of a mill, working horizontally instead of vertically. The cook appeared. He and the butler had just returned from the market.

"Put the firewood down by the kitchen door," he said. "The butler will give you the money."

Nahgoo did not comply with his request, but remained fidgeting with his load and turning first one way and then the other, to the danger of all who approached too near him.

"Lay it on the ground, old father," said the waterman, who appeared on the scene carrying the kerosine tin in which the water was heated for kitchen purposes. "What are you waiting for?"

"This poor man would know if the butler will give the price. If not I will carry the wood back to the jungle."

Hillary was allowing matters to take their course. He was not desirous of interfering. His presence he believed would be sufficient to ensure justice being done to the old man. He had no intention of leaving, however, till the deal had come to a fair conclusion. If Nahgoo appealed to him, it would be time enough to bring moral pressure to bear on the autocrat who ruled the kitchen. The Gipsy was not likely to submit to oppression in silence.

" You will not be allowed to take away the wood. It should have been brought yesterday," said the cook, confident that he would have the support of the butler. " We are short of fuel this morning."

" There was enough in my last load to have supplied the kitchen till to-night," said Nahgoo, swinging half round.

" Keep still with that faggot of yours," shouted the cook angrily. " The butler's food had to be cooked as well as the master's and my own. Do you think that we have time to go into the jungle to cut wood?"

Hillary addressed the cook:

" Can you tell me if the master is in the bungalow?"

" His honour went out this morning at sunrise."

" What time will he be back?"

" We expect him at nine. There is a visitor in the house."

" Which way did the master go?" asked Hillary.

If Oakley had been within reach he would have summoned him to see justice done. After all, it was the master's business to control any extortion that was going on in his kitchen; not his.

" I will ask the butler, perhaps he knows," replied the cook, not at all anxious to come under the displeasure of the Inspector.

Nahgoo swung round again to face the jungle, preparatory to walking off. The company was augmented by the arrival of the kitchen-woman from the depths of the smoky kitchen. Another addition was the second house servant, the matey. He had come from the back veranda of the bungalow. Hearing voices raised in altercation, he had left the knives and knife-board to discover what it was all about.

"I go!" announced Nahgoo, his patience at an end. He began to walk away with the bending of the knees which gives the appearance of a slow run.

"Wait, old man!" called Hillary, who wished to see justice done. "You have carried the wood here. You ought not to have to take it back. Put the firewood down where the cook wishes it to be. I will see to it that you are properly paid."

Nahgoo came back reluctantly with a sulky expression on his face, as though he would have disobeyed if he had dared. He clung to his bundle, however, with its six-foot limbs, and could not be persuaded to part with it. It was his method of protesting against unfair treatment.

The cook and the waterman took up Hillary's words, raising their voices and repeating his directions. The kitchen-woman, who was the waterman's wife, added her voice to the clamour. The urchin, who was proud to call himself the cook's matey, had his say. The old man bore it all with apathetic indifference, as he bore the lightning and thunder of the forest. The boy approached Nahgoo with the intention of pulling the wood from his head.

Again the Gipsy asserted himself. He swung round quickly, missing the boy's head by an inch. Startled, the latter sprang aside and kept at a respectful distance. The rest of the company followed his example.

"Where is the butler?" asked Hillary, who wanted to proceed on his journey. He was inclined to pay the four annas himself, since he had made the promise, and send the crew about their respective business. "Go to the butler's go-down and say I wish to speak to him," he said to the cook.

CH. XIX.

THE MURDERER UNMASKED

THE butler had been supplied with his morning cup of coffee and the particular kind of appas that pleased his fancy. He was taking his ease in the privacy of his room. He was aware of the presence of the Inspector, and he had reasons of his own for not wishing to see him.

"Let the old jungle-man wait!" he said, as the cook brought the summons.

"It would be better if you could speak to the Inspector himself."

"This is no business of an accursed Englishman," replied Cassim, adding abuse that made the cook uncomfortable. He was a law-abiding man and had no grievance against the foreigner from whom he drew a liberal wage.

"Shall I give the old man the four annas?" asked the cook, anxious to conciliate his superior, whose temper was apt to rise at very little provocation.

"I must see the faggot first. It is probably under weight," he responded roughly.

"It looks full up to what it should be."

There was silence, during which the cook waited with increasing anxiety. Seeing that he was not satisfied, Cassim said:

"Tell the old man to leave the wood by the kitchen door."

"He refuses, even though the Inspector has himself told him to do so. He says he will carry it back to the jungle. This would be inconvenient. We want the firewood."

"Why does the Inspector wait? And what has he come for?"

"The big police master has sent for him, and he is going on to the camp."

The movements of the police never failed to interest the domestic community. The cook had been bidden by Hillary himself to call the butler, and he did not care to show himself again without having fulfilled his mission. If it had been anyone else than the Inspector he would not have troubled himself over the butler's contumacy.

"You can go," said Cassim.

"It is best not to anger the police," remarked the cook, who did not stir.

The other looked at him wrathfully, as though he would have transferred the abuse he had given to the English generally to the cook in particular. At that moment he heard his name.

"Cassim! Butler! Where are you? Come and pay the old man and let him go!" called the Inspector, in English.

Unwillingly the Muhammadan rose to his feet. He settled his turban on his head, arranged his dress, and issued from his room. On his appearance Nahgoo approached him, full of protest, as though he would conciliate and placate his creditor. He had brought over-weight not under-weight. The bundle was worth more than four annas; all good, sound, dry wood in long pieces as ordered. It had taken more than two days to collect——

Cassim advanced threateningly. The Gipsy was excited. The butler was losing his temper and his self-possession. The company became silent and curious. They stood round wondering how it would end. They were not a little awed by the temerity of the butler, who was browbeating the old man instead of paying him as the Inspector had ordered.

"Be off, you jungle devil!" cried Cassim, with an outburst of rage that got the better of him. "And you may take your wood away with you. I won't have it at any price!" He turned to Hillary, who was looking on with grave disapproval. "I am sorry, sir, to have to be so severe. I must give him a lesson. If we once let an ignorant man like this——"

His words were cut short. Nahgoo swung round suddenly as if to go. One of the long branches sticking out from his faggot caught the turban of the butler. It was swept from his head, together with the skull cap which fitted into it. The turban rolled a few feet away.

With a cry of rage Cassim stooped and recovered it. As he did so a long tuft of hair on the back of his head uncoiled and fell on his shoulders.

The hush was broken by a chorus of exclamations. From the lips of every spectator escaped one word:

"*The koodimi! The koodimi!*"

Then Nahgoo's voice was heard shrill and clear:

"He is no Mussalman. He is a *Hindu!*"

Knife in hand Cassim sprang at the Gipsy. He might as well have attempted to catch one of the monkeys of the rocks.

"What are you doing, butler?" cried Hillary. "This is an accident. We can't have murder done."

He stopped speaking abruptly and took a step towards Cassim.

"*You* are the man I want!" he said, and he would have laid a detaining hand on his arm. The other evaded him.

Cassim did not wait for more. Turban in hand he darted away from the group and bolted. He made a dash for the jungle. He reached it and disappeared in the undergrowth.

Flight was his only possible course if he wished to preserve his liberty. He was well aware that his fellow-servants would give him no help. His overbearing manner and the contempt he felt, being a caste man himself, for the pariah crew that served the Englishman had not been hidden. He had alienated all of them. Even the cook had no sympathy with him. Fear of his authority had preserved a semblance of friendship, but it was not real.

Hillary had the handcuffs ready. If he could have caught and disarmed the criminal, everyone present would have assisted in securing him. But not one of them would have ventured within reach of the knife of a desperate man.

It was the koodimi that betrayed him. It would have been impossible to explain it away. Nothing he could have said would have excused it. It is never worn by a Muhammadan. On the other hand no Hindu will live without it, unless he is under some ceremonial vow which makes it necessary to shave the whole head. The hair is allowed to grow again as soon as possible. It occupies the exact position on the crown of the head where, in European nations, the tonsure is made. The two have no connection whatever. But both are a mark of a religious faith; a mark that the wearer has no wish, as a rule, to hide.

Assuming the nationality of a Muhammadan, the criminal had hoped to escape detection. As soon as the search lessened and attention was directed to another district, he had intended to effect his escape to the sea coast. Once on board a ship he would be able to throw aside his disguise. It was not congenial nor to his liking. The Hindu has a deep-seated racial hatred for his former conqueror and oppressor.

Nahgoo had not haunted the market in vain. He had observed the man refusing the rice cakes usually eaten by the Muhammadans. He had noticed his avoidance of beef in buying for himself and his master. Mutton and fowls were invariably purchased. Perhaps with the curious instinct shown by a dog, Nahgoo had distrusted the man all along.

Hillary, returning from a short and unsuccessful sprint towards the jungle, was cursing his own clumsiness in letting the man escape. He had to admit to himself that at the cry of "Koodimi!" he had not immediately grasped the full meaning of the revelation.

He remembered that Nahgoo had once given him a vague hint, and he had silenced the old man with something like an accusation of malice. If he had only been a little more patient, a little more discerning, he might have secured the man's arrest in a creditable manner. As it was, he was obliged to admit to himself that he had bungled the business. He had put him on his guard and given him a chance of making good his escape to the foot of the hills.

He dismissed the servants, telling them to get on with their work. If the master asked for the butler they could say that he was out. It had to be remembered that Cassim had not been identified as the murderer, although Hillary had no doubt in his own mind now as to his being the man who was wanted.

"If the butler returns, sir, what are we to do?" asked the cook.

"Let him alone. You saw his knife. He is a desperate man, and will not scruple to use it. You will send word to the camp at once. But you need have no fear; he will not return."

The Inspector's pronouncement was a real relief to the whole staff. They had always stood in awe of the man, but now they were one and all in terror of him. If he returned they determined to decamp and keep out of the way till he was secured. Of this they said nothing to Hillary. They watched the Inspector as he walked quickly away, followed by the Gipsy, after the firewood was deposited at the kitchen door and the money given by the cook. The price would appear in the next day's accounts with the usual addition, which would now go into the cook's pocket.

Hillary and the Gipsy walked in silence, Indian file, to the path beyond the estate, the point at which they had met on this eventful Monday morning. Here they were to part. Before going, Hillary said:

"You should have warned me of this, old father. If I had suspected that he was the man I wanted I could have taken him before he bolted."

"Your honour would not listen. I said all that I dared."

This was a statement Hillary could not deny. He was sufficiently familiar with the Indian character to be aware that it is at all times extremely difficult to get a definite statement of a fact from an Oriental. If he suspects that a relation of the truth will be met with incredulity he will close his lips and be silent. Or he will drift into plausible lying.

"What master wishing, that only I saying," is a well-known maxim with the Indian.

It had influenced Nahgoo to the extent of keeping him silent as soon as he suspected that his hints would be doubted or disbelieved.

"My mistake; I ought to have heard what you wished to say."

Nahgoo salaamed. He appreciated the concession.

"If your honour has any orders to give, this old servant will carry them out without fail."

"Follow in the man's tracks as you would follow a tiger, a wounded tiger," he added. "He is armed, and he is ready to run amûk."

"I will give your honour faithful news of every movement."

"A reward is offered for his capture. You will share it if he is taken through information given by you."

"Alive or dead, sir?"

"There must be no killing. If you kill him it will be murder on your part, and you will be hung."

"I know. Gipsies never kill, but the gods sometimes kill and save much trouble."

Hillary looked at him curiously. His deepest eyes shone with the light that lies in the eyes of the hunter when he picks up a trail that will lead him to the lair of his quarry. He needed no bidding. Nor was it necessary to urge the performance of a duty towards the officers of the law.

Nahgoo had an axe of his own to grind. Although Gipsies never kill their enemies, as the old man had said, they have queer methods of bringing retribution on those who have injured them. Cassim had done ill to rouse the enmity of Nahgoo.

Mr. James Smith was thoroughly enjoying himself. He had slept well, enjoyed his early tea, and was smoking one of his favourite Trichinopoly cigars.

Don had left the bungalow at sunrise on this particular morning to go down to the new clearing. He suggested that during his absence his uncle should look through the estate books, an occupation that held Smith's interest and attention. He was well satisfied with them, and he felt that he was making no mistake in promoting his nephew to be superintendent. He had just finished his examination and closed the books when Estelle came in.

She was glad to find him alone. At the same time she had to admit to herself that she was sorry not to find Don there as well. She and Smith had the bungalow to themselves. The butler had been unmasked and had made his escape into the jungle. Hillary had hurried away to the police camp. He had something to tell his chief; the patrols on the road to the seaports would have to be doubled.

The entire staff of the house sat in a patch of sunlight near the stable, where they could not be seen from the bungalow. They were discussing the incident, and whether the old man had purposely knocked off the turban. If it was so the butler would assuredly slit his throat for him. The matey was convinced that the Gipsy would be found dead on his charpoy in the cave. The cook expressed his faith in the Gipsy and his ability to avoid a collision with the murderer. If anyone came to grief it would be the butler himself and none other.

Having exhausted the subject they went to another question which was more personal. This was an arrangement among themselves as to how the housework was to be done and the various duties pertaining to the butler should be distributed among them. It was decided that the cook was to be the authority in the kitchen. He was to buy the market supplies and keep the daily accounts, which would be given to the master.

The matey was to be head inside the bungalow. He was quite sure that he could fulfil the part to the satisfaction of the master even down to taking charge of the liquor. The only person who felt any elation was the kitchen-boy. With borrowed jacket and turban he was to act as assistant to the matey and bring the dishes into the dining-room, placing them on the sideboard ready for his superior to hand round.

The master, it was agreed, was not to be told anything of what had occurred until the staff had fallen into line.

Smith sitting in the front of the house had heard nothing of the disturbance at the back of the bungalow. At the sound of Estelle's footstep he glanced round.

"Good-morning, my dear; are you alone?"

"Yes, I came away by myself. Zoe was too excited over the arrival of some new dresses from England to care for a ride. They have to be unpacked and fitted on before anything else can be done. I seized the opportunity to come and ask you how you are getting on."

"Very well indeed! Don has cheered up considerably. I have told him that he is to be boss of the group of estates. I am sure that he likes his job. I mentioned the rise in salary."

"Did he accept it?"

"Not until I used a little strong language. He saw that I was not going to stand any nonsense about his wretched principles——"

Estelle laughed. "Poor Don! He dared not turn it down with you glaring fiercely at him."

Smith looked pleased with himself. He hoped he was showing her an example that she would follow. It was on the tip of his tongue to add something severe about mothers' boys, but he did not wish to hurt her feelings.

"We must see what this little bit of promotion will do and if it will bring him to his senses."

"I wonder!" she replied, with just a shade of anxiety in her voice.

"So do I," said Smith. "I have been thinking about you both a good deal. I am afraid he can't get rid of the old atmosphere of your father's house. He knew you then as the mistress only. He was the servant, and he is unable to shake off the impression." He turned to her and added impressively: "Estelle, never put yourself in a false position."

"How about yourself, Uncle James?"

"Me! What do you mean?"

"Aren't you posing as my very dear Uncle James? We're no relation."

"We must remedy that as soon as possible," he replied with a laugh.

"How shall we set about it?" she asked.

"You used to be very much on your dignity in those days."

"I had to be because of our positions," she asked.

"Now you will have to leave your dignity hung up in your wardrobe, and let him see you in a new light," he said.

"What sort of a light?"

"Can't you—don't you think you could lead him on and flirt with him a bit? I believe you have got it in you." He glanced at her with a twinkle in his old eyes. "I shall show him the way and make love to you myself."

"That won't do at all," cried Estelle. "If he thinks that you are entering the lists he will leave the field open for you. Then those blessed old principles will come in the way again and he won't like to interfere with your game."

"You must object to my clumsy ways of love-making, and fly to him for protection," he said, keenly appreciative of the part he proposed to play.

They joked over it, Smith on his part making a great effort to be cheerful and optimistic. He was afraid she would lose heart and give it up altogether if Don became obstinate and difficult. He knew very well that she was not a woman to run after a lover. The happiness of both hung in the balance, and he was not going to allow the scales to fall on the wrong side if he could help it.

" You must stay to breakfast, Estelle," he said presently.

" I am afraid I can't do that. They are expecting me back."

" Give them a miss; they won't mind."

" Where is Don at this present moment?" she asked.

" He ought to be just about returning from the new opening. He will be planting up part of it soon. How about going to meet him?"

" I should like it—but—oh, Uncle James, I can't chase him like that!"

" He hasn't time to chase you, so you've got no choice," he retorted. " You be guided by me, dear, I won't lead you wrong."

It was difficult to resist his pleading. He was making it a personal matter and letting her see how deeply disappointed he would be if she and Don did not arrive at some understanding.

" How am I to find him?"

"You must take the path through the belt of jungle running down by the side of the estate. You can't miss it."

She stood in hesitation as though in two minds. He looked at her anxiously, not daring to say more lest he should drive her into obstinacy. She held out her hand.

"Good-bye. I can't do it. I'll be off home——"

"You little coward! You love him; you know you do! And yet you run away as if poor old Don was the most detestable man in the world."

"I admit that I am a coward, but I can't help it."

"I shall be compelled to take a hand in this business, I can see. I shall pitch a doleful tale and tell him that he is letting you die of a broken heart."

"He won't believe you!" she cried.

"My dear, do be serious. Let him see——"

"You don't mean that I must throw myself at his head like that silly little rabbit, Zoe? I really could not do it."

"You haven't tried," he said with a touch of indignation.

"We seem at a deadlock—just where we left off," she observed with a little sigh.

"All the more reason for you to get a move on."

"You will have to help me. I can't do it by myself."

"You told me I wasn't to interfere," exclaimed Smith, rounding on her.

"It depends on how you do it."

"I was so impressed by what you said on the subject that I never once mentioned your name all the time we were talking last night," he said, assuming a virtuous tone of injury that made her laugh.

"You old dear! That was good of you!"

"The nearest I went to it was to suggest that it was a lonely life up here, and I hinted that he would be more comfortable if he married. This was after I had mentioned the rise in his salary that we meant to give him."

"If it wasn't for the money everything would go smoothly," cried Estelle.

"I once tried to marry a woman with money myself. The only difficulty was that she turned me down and laughed at me. I hadn't anything like a thousand a year, and she was ten years older than I was. I've been fretting for her ever since."

His merry countenance was illuminated with a broad smile that belied his words.

"How old were you?" asked Estelle, her suspicions aroused.

"Sixteen and a half."

"Poor Uncle James! I didn't know that you had been crossed in love!"

"My dear, I wish you would sink all your principles and chase Don all you know. Now is the time to lay hold of your happiness and his, and let him see that you can't live without him. Do go and meet him and let him help you up the hill back to the bungalow."

"I can't do it. Good-bye. I'll ride over to-morrow morning. We shall all meet at the club this evening. Perhaps Don will show me the Southern Cross again after it gets dark."

"On the other hand it may thunder and lighten till all's blue. No time like the present, you silly child," said Smith, vexed and unhappy at his want of success.

She ran out of the bungalow and stood among the roses in the garden. How foolish it all seemed. She was not a coy child to need a busy man to waste his time in pursuing her. Uncle James had reason to be annoyed. He had done his bit, made Don independent and able to ask any woman, rich or poor, to marry him; and here she was prepared to upset all his nicely laid plans. It was an opportunity that might not occur again. She called up the syce, and took a sudden resolution.

"I am staying here to breakfast," she said. "Lead the horse home. It must have its food. You can bring it back afterwards."

Smith, believing that all his arrangements had come to nothing, remained seated in his chair, deep in thought. He was not easily discouraged, but for the time being he was at a loss to think what the next step ought to be. He decided that it would be of no use to follow her out and continue the argument. The only consolation that remained was that he no longer felt pledged to silence. When the opportunity came he would speak very plainly to

Don himself. If he could not induce Estelle to do the "chasing," he might perhaps persuade his nephew into it. After all, he was the right person to do the chasing.

CH. XXI. ESTELLE EXPLORES THE JUNGLE

ESTELLE was full of excitement. This would be a surprise for good old Uncle James as well as Don. With a beating heart she passed through the garden. It was full of flowers in bloom with tropical luxuriance: roses, heliotrope, lilies, dahlias, alamandas, clerodendron, and others.

By sending the horse back she had burnt her boats. Her meeting with Don could not be avoided. Would he understand? She was forcing herself upon him for the second time. In the previous meeting she had met with a distinct rebuff. It would be intolerable if it was repeated; if Don refused definitely to marry. Her one ray of hope lay in the memory of the kiss. Don's real attitude towards her was revealed when his arms closed round her and his lips met hers. Why—oh, why—was he compelling her to pursue him?

Her cheeks burned as she thought of it. It was nothing less than barefaced "chasing," a proceeding that had evoked her scorn and contempt when she had seen it practised by other women.

Ah! one day she would give him the scolding he deserved for obliging her to act thus. Her spirits rose as she thought of their meeting. She would disarm him with her confidence, her joyousness. She would not allow herself to be rejected. Uncle James would support her if necessary.

The scenery of the jungle was magnificent. It was her first introduction to the primeval forest. The Farrs' estate, on which she was staying, had long since been cleared and turned into tea. On Oodiya, between the belt of jungle that belonged to the estate and the Government reserves, the forest was in its pristine beauty.

It was about half-past eight o'clock. Not a servant was visible. Even the gardeners had vanished. They ought to have been busy weeding and tying up the flowers, but suspecting that something had gone wrong in the household, they had joined the crowd by the stables. The servants were still sitting in conclave. Most of them were talking in hoarse whispers, indifferent to the fact that no one was listening. They had arrived at the point where the majority were convinced that Cassim would return sooner or later to collect his personal property. His money he carried on him, but there were various odds and ends that he would not willingly leave behind. Then they talked in hushed voices of the knife.

No wonder that Estelle passed on her way without being observed.

The sun at that hour was not overpoweringly hot and the air still retained some of the freshness of the night. Overhead the giant trees spread their branches laden with thick foliage and gave a welcome shade. Shrubs formed a thick undergrowth and reminded her of the secluded shrubberies of some big country house in England.

On each side of the narrow track that she was pursuing was a carpet of ferns growing knee-deep. In places they gave way to beds of moss. Here and there a little stream trickled on its way to join the torrent at the bottom of the valley. A rough bridge of logs carried the path across. She stopped to look down at the gemlike blossoms of the wild begonia hanging over the water.

Green barbets called to each other from bowers of foliage. The pheasant crow in a distant tree sounded its deep note. Butterflies on strong wings flitted past, soaring high and settling in a sunny patch on the trunks of trees or the face of a rock, to warm their freshly opened wings.

"How beautiful it all is! What a lovely place."

Frequently she stopped to listen and look around her, hoping each moment that Don would come in sight, striding towards her, his face full of joy and surprise at seeing her there.

She had been walking chiefly downhill for over half an hour. The path passed through tunnels of greenery; apparently it was only cut out when it became wellnigh impassable. In places the ground was very rough. She was anxious not to go too far. It would entail a longer walk than she wished to have, and in addition it would mean a stiff climb back.

She arrived at a point where a track branched off from the Oodiya path and passed out of the estate. It led into the valley through which the torrent flowed, and was used by the coolies of the estate to reach the zigzags on the other side of the gorge. It was just at this spot that Oodiya touched the forest reserve. The path passed from private property into the jungle that belonged to Government and became more intricate and wild. Except for the main path running down the valley, which was kept tolerably clear of undergrowth, the game tracks were left to take care of themselves. Where a woodcutter wanted to pass with his load he hacked a way through, but it was soon overgrown again, unless it received constant attention. Estelle was under the impression that she was still on private property.

Someone approached from the direction of the torrent. She rose to her feet from the boulder on which she had been resting and found herself confronted by Cassim, in whom she recognised Don's butler.

He was dressed neatly as usual, with his coat buttoned across his breast; his turban was in regular folds, showing no mark of the ill treatment it had received at the hands of Nahgoo. His silver watch and chain were very much in evidence. He salaamed by touching his forehead, but he did not speak.

"It is you, Cassim. You are Mr. Oakley's butler. I have seen you at the bungalow."

"That is so, lady. I serve the master of Oodiya."

"I understand that Mr. Oakley is returning this way from the new clearing. Have you seen him?"

"His honour has left the clearing. He crossed by the stepping-stones and went towards the Gipsy's cave."

"Why has he gone all that way round?"

"To order firewood and charcoal for the tea factory."

"Then I have missed him. How tiresome!" she said with disappointment in her voice.

Cassim's eyes glistened as they rested on the pearls visible through the opening of her dress at the neck.

"If your honour will allow me to show the way, I can take you by a path through the jungle where you will meet Mr. Oakley as he comes from the cave."

"Is it far? I don't want a long walk. I am already rather tired."

"It is no farther than returning by the way your honour has come."

She hesitated. Her instinct prompted her to go back. Her desire to see Don by himself urged her forward.

"The path on this side"—he pointed to the forest reserve—"is easier walking than the one by which your honour has come. It is used more."

She had no reason to doubt his statement.

"Very well, lead on," she said. "I hope we shall meet the master soon."

"That we are sure to do," he replied in such excellent English as to make her almost forget that he was an Indian.

He plunged down the gorge with all the confidence of a man who is intimate with the road, which was not the case. He had always lived a retired life at the bungalow and had never ventured into the forest.

Estelle followed with no misgivings. She was becoming more and more tired each step she took. The trail was difficult to see and it was frequently obstructed by rocks, which she had to pass round or scramble over.

"What were you doing in the forest?" she asked as she stopped to get her breath.

He gave her a curious look.

"I am returning from the old man's cave to the bungalow. I came also to speak about firewood. He brings short weight and wood that will not burn."

Again they moved on, and Estelle was beginning to regret that she had not followed her first instinct and returned by the way she came.

"Why are we still going downhill?" she asked presently as he went rapidly along a game track that seemed to lose itself in a labyrinth of undergrowth. It became thicker and more difficult to work her way through it each step she took.

"We must cross the torrent and this is the shortest and best way to the stepping-stones."

Even now it did not enter her head to doubt his good faith. She was ignorant of all that had taken place that morning, and unaware that she had placed herself under the guidance of a desperate fugitive from justice. For ten minutes more she struggled along in silence, growing angry with herself and still more annoyed with the idiot who was leading her.

"You have lost your way!" she cried as they arrived at the foot of a rampart of rock ten or twelve feet high, common enough in the rugged slopes of the Ghauts.

The track came to an abrupt end.

"This is most provoking," she said. "I ought not to have trusted you as a guide. I must go back by the way I came—if I can find it."

CH. XXII. DON AND HIS UNCLE ARE PERTURBED

Don returned by way of the jungle and missed Estelle by a quarter of an hour. Being in ignorance that she was coming to meet him, he was not looking for her. She was in his thoughts, however, and had been there ever since he had known that his prospects had changed. Those priggish principles were growing more and more contemptible, and memory was doing its best to keep the encounter under the Southern Cross warm and fresh.

He hurried home so that Smith should not be kept waiting for breakfast. He was tired when he reached the bungalow and, being late, went off at once to bathe and change.

At half-past nine the breakfast bell rang. The servants, true to their nature as good domestics, had not allowed the unmasking of the butler to interfere with the routine of the bungalow.

The cook prepared the food. The matey served it at table. The kitchen-boy surpassed himself in carrying it to the dining-room and in the washing up of plates and dishes afterwards.

Don and his uncle were deeply interested in estate business and talked of nothing else throughout the breakfast. Smith again expressed his satisfaction with the way the estate affairs had been managed.

"You have a good clerk in that Anglo-Indian assistant. We must raise his pay if you keep him on."

"I shall be glad to employ him entirely in the office."

"In that case you will need another assistant for the outdoor supervision."

"It wouldn't be a bad plan to engage an Englishman for the purpose," remarked Don. "I could soon teach him his work."

"An excellent idea," said Smith. "A man of that kind should be able to carry on by himself if by chance you were away from the estate for a short time."

"I wasn't thinking of that. I was only considering the efficiency of our staff if we are going to double our out-turn of tea from the factory," said Don.

"Make your own arrangements. We are doing so well that you need not economise over the staff."

After a while Smith said: "I had a visitor this morning while you were out."

"Did Farr turn up? I should like him to see what I am doing with the bit of land I am opening. He has always something sensible to say."

"No, it was Estelle. She and I have become great friends on this trip. She is like a daughter or a niece to me. You don't know her as I do. When you were living with her father you had no chance of appreciating her worth."

"I saw enough of her to realise that she was one in a thousand," returned Don warmly, as though he would repudiate any accusation of blindness to Estelle's virtues. "You must remember that our positions naturally prevented association on equal terms."

"That's all at an end now and I advise you to forget what has practically ceased to exist," said his uncle.

Don did not reply. He was disinclined to discuss the question of his relations with Estelle. He was becoming uncomfortably convinced that he had behaved idiotically, and he had no excuse to offer for his folly.

"I asked her to stay to breakfast. She seemed half inclined to do so. Perhaps if you had been here to add your voice to mine she might have been persuaded."

"I am afraid I haven't much influence," responded Don with a sigh.

"Oh, haven't you?" cried Smith, letting himself go. "You may not be aware of it, but now that her father is gone I happen to know that you stand for a good deal in her life."

Don looked ill at ease. After all that had taken place he could not deny his uncle's statement. He was obliged to admit to himself that she did not regard him with indifference. Smith continued:

"Of course, it's no business of mine, but I can see that the married men have the best time of it up here."

He did not mention what connection this sudden generalising on marriage had to do with Estelle. He did his best to appear indifferent. He had not forgotten the promise he had given that he would refrain from putting a finger in the pie.

"Anyway," said Don. "I must consider the estate before I pay any attention to my private affairs."

If he thought to silence his uncle he was mistaken.

"Quite so; but the one need not be pursued to the exclusion of the other." After a pause he added: "I suggested to Estelle that she should go and meet you."

"Why did you do that?"

"She seemed disappointed at not seeing you."

"Did you know which way I should return?" asked Don, forgetting for the moment that his uncle had been to Oodiya on a previous occasion and was familiar with the estate.

"I took it for granted that you would come through the belt of jungle for the sake of the shade if for nothing else. It's your shortest way. I told her to follow the path down and she would meet you coming up from the new clearing. That was right, wasn't it?"

"Quite. We ought not to have missed seeing each other. She must have gone back to the Farrs."

They left the breakfast table and moved into the sitting-room. Smith settled down into a comfortable lounge and lighted a cigar. Don seated himself at his writing table.

It was the hour for the butler to bring the daily account to his master. The two men had been absorbed in their talk about the estate. The waiting at table had proceeded without a hitch; Cassim's absence had passed unnoticed. Smith continued, taking up the thread of the conversation.

"When Estelle left me I was under the impression that she intended to follow my advice although she pretended that she was too shy 'to chase you,' as she called it. It isn't possible that you have missed her, is it?"

"I don't see how it could have happened unless she wandered off into the forest."

"She wouldn't do that because she was looking for you," said Smith.

"Did she tell you that she was going to meet me?"

"On the contrary, she distinctly refused. But the refusal was said in such a way as to make me believe that the temptation would be too strong."

Don was disappointed. He would have been more glad to see her than he could say. He wanted to beg her forgiveness, to throw himself on her mercy. Above all, he longed to hold her in his arms again and tell her that nothing in this world should part them. Money or no money he could not live without her.

He called for the butler. The matey, who was busy in the dining-room, appeared in answer.

"Did you see Miss Talbot when she was here this morning?" he asked.

The man, never a brilliant specimen of house servant, looked blank as he answered in the negative.

"Perhaps you saw her syce?"

"No, sir. I was busy with the knives and silver in the back veranda."

"Is Miss Talbot's horse here?"

The matey looked frightened, as if he anticipated blame and a scolding for not having noticed the arrival of a visitor.

"No, sir," he replied.

"Fetch the butler and let's hear what he has to say."

The matey departed quickly. He went no farther than the back veranda, where he stayed for the space of two minutes. Then he returned more scared than ever.

"Butler sick," he said. "Asking master's pardon. Lying down with fever."

This was his method of keeping silence on the great event as enjoined by the Inspector. The excuse is a common plea for absence of all kinds, for indisposition, french-leave, drunkenness, or any other cause. It calls for no comment on the part of the master, who accepts it with the best grace he can assume. It meant that the butler would be absent all day. The work of the house would proceed as usual, and if any orders had to be given they must go through the second-in-command. The rendering of the bazaar account must be postponed till the next morning. Don closed the book and threw it aside.

"It is quite clear that Estelle went back to the

Farrs' bungalow for breakfast," he remarked to Smith in a tone of finality that closed the question.

"She must have done so," acquiesced Smith. "I can't suggest any other explanation."

"I have to go down to the tea-house," said Don.

"Won't you have a smoke and a bit of a rest first?"

"Too late. I must look to the firing of the tea. I can't trust my new tea-maker yet, although he will do in time."

"All right. I won't offer to come with you," said his uncle, who was growing sleepy over his half-consumed cigar.

Both Smith and Don were satisfied that Estelle had ridden off home; otherwise the horse would have been waiting under the tree near the stable with the syce. Their fears were set at rest. The older man composed himself for his nap while the younger went off on his errand to the tea factory.

CH. XXIII. ESTELLE IS MISSING

DON was delayed at the tea-house by various matters that required his attention. New and up-to-date machinery, water-power from a stream running near, the installation of electricity, and other improvements were being instituted. His uncle was giving him every encouragement with financial support; and Don felt that it was an opportunity to be grasped with both hands.

Returning to the bungalow he caught sight of Estelle's horse and syce. The horse was picketed under the big tree. The syce was listening to some absorbing tale that the Oodiya groom was pouring into his ear.

The horse and its attendant were not there when Don left the bungalow and he was startled.

He quickened his pace. His pet schemes vanished as he sprang up the steps of the veranda, his heart beating in the anticipation of meeting her. He glanced round the lounge. She was not there. His uncle was alone and still occupying his comfortable chair. Smith was just opening his eyes after a sound sleep.

"Back again, my boy!" he exclaimed. "It seems like five minutes since you left."

He sat up and reached out his hand for another cigar.

"Where's Estelle?" asked Don abruptly.

"She went back to the Farrs, as I told you," replied Smith with a yawn. He was still sleepy.

"How is it then that her horse is here? She can't have gone home," he cried, a vague apprehension of some mistake filling his mind.

"She must have gone home," reiterated Smith, now thoroughly awake and beginning to feel perturbed.

Don returned to the veranda and called up the syce.

"Your mistress, where is she?" he demanded.

"I don't know, sir. I have brought the horse according to order."

"What was the order?"

"The missie said that the horse was to go home for food and come back afterwards."

"Where did the missie have breakfast?"

"Here with your honour. The horse has had its feed and I have taken my rice."

Don's syce had come up from the stable to hear why the master was complaining—he took it to be a complaint of some sort from the tone of his voice. The rest of the establishment followed. The secret of the butler's absence was out at last, and his honour would have to learn the truth whatever the police might say.

"I must see the butler," cried Don, who was beginning to feel that there was a mystery to be solved.

The cook came forward, with the general consent of the rest, to explain.

"The butler has run away, sir. The police came this morning while your honour was out. Before they could take him he ran into the jungle, and we have not seen him since."

The whole story was told in the characteristic manner of the Indian domestics, in a mixed, fragmentary way. Don learnt that Cassim, the excellent

Muhammadan, had turned out to be a Hindu wearing a koodimi; that the Gipsy had made the discovery by knocking off the turban. The butler had chased the old man with a knife, but could not catch him. Then his honour the Inspector had tried to put on the handcuffs, but Cassim bolted and disappeared into the jungle.

It was an extraordinary story; one which Don could scarcely believe. The servants, when once their tongues were loosened, talked two or three at a time if they were not silenced, and not one of them seemed able to answer any direct question. It was difficult to get them to speak of anyone else. Don cared very little who and what the butler was. The man could easily be replaced if he did not return to his work. What he wanted was information about Estelle.

At last Don was successful in making himself, not only heard, but understood. Where was Miss Talbot? he asked over and over again. Had the matey seen her? or the cook? He ascertained that her own syce was the last person to whom she had spoken. As the syce was leading the horse away in the morning he saw her walking through the garden by the path that would take her to the bottom of the estate. She had mentioned that she was staying to breakfast.

This information was disturbing. The distance to the Farrs' bungalow was too long to walk. Don thought it best, however, to enquire if by any chance she had returned there. A note was despatched by his own syce, and a reply came back to the effect that nothing had been seen of Miss Talbot since she left the house in the early morning. It was supposed that she was stopping at Oodiya for breakfast with Mr. Smith and Mr. Oakley.

It all seemed simple and straightforward except for the fact that she had unaccountably disappeared.

Smith was troubled more than a little. It was he who had suggested to Estelle the walk down to the clearing. He believed that she had taken his advice, had been tempted to wander in the forest while waiting, and had been lost. He knew how fatally easy it was to lose one's bearings in jungle when once the beaten track was left. The ground in the forests of the Western Ghauts is nowhere level nor is it uniformly up and down. The side of a mountain, with its gorges, valleys, and dells, undulates continuously. Game tracks lead to no human habitation but to pools where an animal may drink or to pasturage where it may feed.

Smith grew increasingly anxious and troubled. He wanted to start off in the blazing sun to look for her on the estate paths. Don pointed out that she could not get lost in the tea. She must have wandered into the jungle.

"If Estelle has lost her way in the forest there is only one person who can help me," Don concluded. "And that is Nahgoo, the old Gipsy."

"Who is he?"

"A jungle-wallah who lives in the forest and supplies us with firewood. I shall go off at once to the old man's cave and set him to work. He knows the forest better than any living soul in these parts."

Don prepared to start with as little delay as possible, leaving his uncle in the bungalow. Smith was restless and unhappy. The cigar was left unsmoked on the ash-tray. He could not sit still, but wandered in and out of the sitting-room, conscious of his inability to help.

"Much as I should like to come with you, I can't do it," he said. "I am not hard enough at my age. I should only add to your trouble by getting lost myself if once I left the estate."

"You are best here," replied Don. "With no butler and the servants upset I am glad to have someone in the house with a head on his shoulders. Estelle may return at any minute."

"What if she has fallen over a rock and broken her ankle?" said Smith. "I suppose we need not be afraid of an attack by wild animals?"

"Very improbable. Leopards and tigers are few and far between in districts that are cultivated. If left to themselves they will get out of the way. They have nerves like cats. The only animal we might fear is the rogue elephant. Jack Hayward has sent out his shikaris to track it."

"Where was it when last heard of?"

"Forty miles away in another valley."

"Forty miles—not much of a distance for an elephant," remarked Smith. "Let's hope it will keep its distance, that's all."

"If Estelle should turn up tell the cook to send a coolie to the Gipsy's cave. I shall be in that direction. I must find the old man. My fear is lest he should have gone off on one of his long tramps to the coast."

Don departed, his impatience growing with each minute of unnecessary delay. He would not wait for tea. Smith had to take it by himself without much appetite.

At about four o'clock Zoe appeared. She came in like a little whirlwind, full of questions. Smith asked her to sit down and wait, but she was too restless. She enquired with transparent simplicity which way Don had gone. "I want to help him. Poor old Don! He will be frightfully anxious."

Smith smiled as he suggested that he might have taken the path leading to the new opening, or he might, with equal likelihood, have gone to the Assistant Superintendent's camp to ask for a search party of police.

He did not mention the Gipsy's cave.

After wandering aimlessly about the room in a manner that irritated and fidgeted the old man she took herself off, to his great relief.

"So that's how the wind blows with Miss Zoe," said Smith to himself as she disappeared. "She has no chance," he added with a touch of grim satisfaction.

ESTELLE sustained a distinct shock when the sudden conviction seized her that her guide had lost his way. She glanced round to look for the track by which she had come. It had vanished, as game tracks are apt to do when they lead into little out-of-the-way gorges and dells. If the game, chiefly deer, are travelling to find pasturage at the foot of the hills, or shelter in the forest after a night's feeding, they keep to the ridges of the spurs and do not trust themselves to a line of country that may lead to a swamp or into a cul-de-sac like this at which she had arrived.

The loss of the path puzzled her. She had been walking behind Cassim and had not observed that for some time past he had been moving through the jungle haphazard, pushing his way where it was thinnest without having a notion of the direction in which he was going. They had also lost the sound of the torrent which she had caught now and then as she stumbled down the uneven hill-side.

Suddenly she found herself faced by the butler, who obstructed her way. She was already annoyed with herself for having been so foolish as to take the man for a guide. It was evident that he had no more knowledge of the path than she had.

"What is the meaning of this?" she cried. "Let me pass. You can find your master and tell him that I have gone back to the estate."

"You can tell him that yourself," he replied insolently.

"I shall return to the bungalow by the estate path," she repeated, under the impression that he was too stupid to understand. "You need not come. I am able to find my way by myself. And let me tell you that I shall certainly report your extraordinary conduct to your master."

"Oakley is no longer my master. I left his service this morning. I am on my way down to the coast."

She gazed at him in surprise and consternation.

"Then why have you led me such a dance as this, I should like to know?" she demanded.

"I will tell you why," he said, his manner becoming more aggressive as each minute passed. "I brought you here so that I might take those pearls that you are wearing. I shall want money for my journey and they will serve my purpose."

She stepped back. He had approached too near for her liking.

"My pearls!" she repeated, facing him boldly. "What do you mean? I am not going to let you have my necklace!"

"I intend to have the pearls and the sooner you hand them over the better."

She laughed derisively. She could not have done anything more irritating. Indians cannot stand ridicule.

"You—a servant like you—asking for pearls! You forget yourself!"

"It is you, madam, who is forgetting herself. Are you aware that we are deep in the jungle with no one within hearing?"

He anticipated some sign of fear at this reminder, but it did not come.

"All the same, don't deceive yourself, Cassim. You are not going to have my pearls."

He took a step forward. A strong brown hand shot out towards her neck.

She eluded him. Had a definite path been visible she would have leaped for it and fled, but she could not distinguish any trace of a track, however faint. He had stated the truth when he said that they were in the depths of the jungle. She noticed that he had so manœuvred their position as to leave her with her back to the steep face of the rock while he barred her progress in front. She was practically a prisoner.

Before she fully realised her peril he had seized her by the arm with one hand. With the other he gripped her throat. His fingers closed on her windpipe, his large thumb pressing it cruelly and in such a way as to stifle her screams.

Estelle was not lacking in courage. She was tall and strong, with a capability of self-defence acquired by the physical exercise taken in the sports of the present day.

Even at this stage, when the man had shown himself in his character as a thief, she could not believe that he would dare to murder her. He intended to take her pearls but not her life. And she determined to put up a good fight for them. He should not have them without a struggle.

She tore at the hand that clasped her throat. His fingers were like iron. She could not stir them. She succeeded in wresting her arm away from his other hand. He was in such haste to possess himself of the necklace that he let go his hold in order that he might grip it, believing that he had only to pull at it and it would come away. But the clasp was strong and he was unable to detach it.

In handling the necklace his fingers were not far from her mouth. She bent her head and managed to reach them. Her teeth closed on them and she bit to the bone.

After the bite, which wrung an exclamation of pain from him, he released the necklace. His hand went to his coat and he thrust it inside the garment at the waist. As he withdrew his hand she caught the gleam of steel in the sunlight. It was the knife with which he had threatened Nahgoo. Her eyes were opened at last to her full danger. Unless she could disarm him he would murder her.

Swift as thought, and before he could anticipate her action, she slipped her two hands along his arm, reached his wrist, and seized the knife. Twisting it round violently she wrested it from his grasp.

Swaying from side to side, gasping for breath under his strangulating grip, she fell backwards into a bed of fern. As she fell she threw the knife from her. It was jerked into the thick vegetation with which they were surrounded and was lost. In the struggle she received a wound from the knife in her wrist, from which the blood flowed freely. He bent over her intent on securing the pearls.

She continued to struggle and fight. She beat at his face, at his eyes, scratching like a maddened cat. She caught his short beard and gave it a vicious sideway wrench. It hurt severely. She felt his fingers on her throat relax as he partly lost his balance.

She could breathe again and, what was more, she recovered the use of her voice. She sent out a long, piercing scream with all the force she could muster. Then she struggled to regain her feet.

He struck her savagely. Not content with this he knelt down, lifted her head as she lay there, and beat it against the ground. He glanced round in search of the knife. Mercifully for Estelle it was lost in the depths of the luxuriant fern.

After the blows she became limp with unconsciousness. Her body relaxed and the colour fled from her face. Her eyes closed, and at last she was still.

His hand was bleeding from her teeth, there were long scores down his cheeks made by her nails. He was beside himself with rage. He was conqueror, but had been obliged to fight harder for his victory than if his opponent had been a man of his own race. He would have repeated the blows and have battered the life out of her in sheer revenge, but something made him pause.

Far up on the mountain above them came a call. It was in answer to her scream. It startled Cassim. Could it have come from the police? He had forgotten their existence. They might be already on his tracks, the Inspector and the Gipsy leading. It was the Gipsy he feared most. The old man knew the intricacies of the jungle like the deer that were born in it.

If he wished to save his neck from the hangman's rope he must be off to some secret place, to lie closely hidden till he could make good his escape in the darkness. This was no spot for him to remain in. The call she had given would bring someone sooner or later: the police or the Gipsy.

But first and foremost, before he thought of escape, he must secure the pearls, and that as quickly as possible. He inserted his fingers and tried to pull the string over her head. She might have done it herself, but it was too much for him. He dared not break the string. If the loose pearls fell to the ground he would never be able to recover them any more than he could recover his knife in that tangle of growth. He fumbled for the clasp, which was set with diamonds of some value. After a few minutes that seemed an eternity the clasp yielded to pressure and the pearls slipped into his hands.

He looked down at her as she lay limp at his feet. The blood from his hand was smeared over her face and dress. Her wrist was bleeding, and she was like a crushed lily. No ray of pity touched him. He had the criminal temperament. It would have been a gratification to have completed the horrid deed that he had begun. If the knife had been ready to hand he would undoubtedly even now have killed her to prevent any tale being told of his violence. To strangle her with his hands would take time and possibly necessitate another struggle.

He stooped and examined her. She was quite unconscious, and with the blows he had given her she was sufficiently disabled to stay where she was for some time to come. If she recovered her senses she would be too dazed to remember how it was that she was lost in the forest. What did it matter if she lived or died? By the time she could tell her story he would be out of reach and on board some country craft that would take him to Ceylon; or he would go up north to Karachee, where he could pose as a Parsee pearl merchant and live in comfort, without having to associate with outcasts and pariahs who served the hated Europeans.

Down the opposite side of the torrent and following the valley crept Nahgoo. He stepped noiselessly, listening, sniffing the air like a dog or a jackal, his eyes everywhere. Nothing escaped his notice.

When he arrived at an open space affording a view, he took cover behind a bush or a tree-trunk and peered across the valley. He was watching for any movement that could not be attributed to the wind and that might betray to the practised eye the presence of a human being or an animal.

Since his adventure with the python he had been careful how he put his feet down in thick jungle. He had not forgotten the snake nor had he forgotten the rogue elephant. The rogue was still at large, escaping the bullets of the keen sportsmen who were ready for it should it come within the range of their rifles.

Nahgoo arrived at the torrent, and followed its course as well as the jungle would allow him. Suddenly he stopped and dropped to the ground close to a boulder. Lying up against it he might have been part of it. He was of a similar tint, and his skin had a rugged, weather-worn appearance like the rock.

He had caught sight of Cassim, the man for whom he had been watching ever since Hillary had bidden him act as tracker.

Cassim had not been born and bred in the jungle or he would never have walked through it wearing a turban and a coat and pyjamas if he did not wish to be seen. He would have travelled like a woodcutter, naked to the waist and with a discoloured rag of calico twisted round his head. The Gipsy had not forgotten how he had been chased with the knife. He had no wish to come again into contact with the fugitive. On the contrary, Hillary had warned him to keep out of the way; nevertheless, he must be true to his trust. He had been ordered to watch but not to show himself. The fugitive must not suspect that he was being followed and marked down. So Nahgoo remained hidden until the man had crossed the torrent by the stepping-stones.

While he lay there, his eyes busy, the old man speculated on what had caused the scream which had reached his ears, and to which he had responded. Perhaps the knife had been used to silence someone who had recognised the criminal. It was not the cry of a woodcutter calling to his companion, nor was it the scream of an eagle, nor of a wounded animal. It was human. What could have caused it?

While he was puzzling his brain over its origin he caught sight of the fugitive climbing up the side of the valley. Instead of following the path to the zigzags, Cassim took the track that led to the monkey valley. This, in the Gipsy's opinion, was satisfactory. It enabled the old man to mark down his quarry. The little valley was a hiding hole from which, however, there was no exit except by way of the entrance, which entrance the Gipsy had only to watch.

Here Cassim would be tempted to rest and sleep until he could creep away in the brilliant starlight and reach some house on the road, where he could ask for the fish curry popular with Muhammadans. The police, if already on the watch, would be looking for a Hindu. He must continue to hide the fatal koodimi under a Mussalman-tied turban, and wear the coat and pyjamas that belonged to the turban.

Nahgoo watched for some minutes to discover if Cassim made any attempt to continue his journey down the ghaut. Then the old man stood up and considered the circumstances. He had not been ordered to report on his tracking. He must wait until the police enquired for the information, which they would not do until they were in sufficient force to surround and take the criminal.

Nahgoo continued to puzzle over the meaning of the scream that he had heard. He would not be satisfied till he had solved the mystery for himself. Having made sure of the retreat of the fugitive, he could allow his attention to wander. Like a terrier that has driven a rat into a hole, he was content to leave him there and follow up a new and more interesting scent.

He went down to the stepping-stones and crossed over to the other side. The path was fairly well worn, there being no bridge over the stream till the low country was reached.

Searching with the keen, experienced eyes of an old jungle man, he discovered a spot where the vegetation showed traces of having been trodden down. The marks of the footsteps were slight, but they were sufficient to lead him on. It was a circuitous and erratic line, betraying the fact that the person passing that way did not know where he was. Sometimes the fugitive had burst through bushes, leaving behind him a broken branch that marked his trail. No woodcutter would have left such evidence of his ignorance of the forest paths.

Nahgoo followed the erratic trail. Occasionally he lost it, but he picked it up again. It was leading him to the point from which he had heard the cry. He stopped and sniffed the air. Blossoms? The scent was unlike any with which he was familiar in the forest.

He lost it and continued his tracking. The trail descended into a gorge with steep sides and thick with shrubs over which towered the forest giants.

Again the scent of English lavender was wafted on the air. Another fifty feet brought him to Estelle. She was lying just as Cassim had left her. Nahgoo stared at her in astonishment. If it had been an Indian woman or boy it would not have surprised him, but here was an English lady whom he had never seen before. There was no lady on Oodiya.

The master was a single man and had no one living with him.

He squatted beside her as he had sat on his heels by the side of the old monkey. He did not dare to touch her. He wondered if she was alive or dead. There was blood on her hands and face and on her dress. This was Cassim's doing. This was the work of the knife that the murderer would have thrust into the Gipsy's heart when the turban was knocked off.

Nahgoo was without the little brass lota that he usually carried. But the man of the jungle is rarely at a loss in supplying his needs.

He rose to his feet and searched for the leaves of the wild ginger. These he made into a cup, pinning them together with stalks of grass. He went back to the stream and filled his leaf cup with water. Very gently he brushed her lips with a dripping fern. Then he passed it over her forehead. As he did so he caught sight of her bruised neck, and a sound escaped his lips that was like the growl of an angry dog.

After a few minutes she moaned. Her eyelids quivered, and she turned her head towards him. She was conscious of a terrible pain in her head, where the man had struck her, and her neck felt bruised and crushed. Her eyes opened, and she met the gaze of the old man. It was a friendly, commiserating gaze which reassured her.

"Cassim! Where is he?" she asked.

Nahgoo recognised the name. He pointed to the opposite side of the valley, and did his best to assure her that the villain had gone away and would trouble her no more, none of which she understood.

She had a dim recollection that the butler had turned upon her. It was a kind of nightmare. He had given her blows which must have caused her to faint. She tried to raise herself, and felt stiff and sore all over.

The old man watched her closely. He could see that she was suffering. He offered her more water. After sipping from the leaf, her head fell back and she seemed to relapse into semi-consciousness. The truth was, although she did not know it, she was suffering from slight concussion of the brain.

Nahgoo noticed that she was very white and had none of that pale pink oleander tint in her cheeks that was to be seen in the faces of the English. She must not be left. Yet it was impossible for him to remain with her at that out-of-the-way spot. Moreover, Cassim might return with his knife——

The Gipsy pulled out the little bag that he wore at his waist. It served as pocket and purse. He took from it a screw of paper in which were some small brown pills. One of these he placed between her lips, just as he had given the opium to the dying monkey.

This was not opium, but a concoction of hemp and datura. It had a contrary effect to opium, and was one of the temporary stimulants which Indians are never without. It is a valuable restorative in cases of physical exhaustion, when in self-preservation a supreme effort has to be made.

It had its effect. In ten minutes' time Estelle was raising herself into a sitting position. Soon afterwards she was on her feet signing to the old man to show her the way home.

She discovered the blood on her hands and wondered vaguely how it came there. She had a confused impression that she had struggled with someone who had tried to injure her, and that she had fought for her liberty. Somehow Cassim was mixed up in it, but how she could not remember. The incident of the knife she had forgotten. Finding a wound on her wrist, she bound it with her handkerchief.

Laying her hand on the old man's bare arm, she moved forward, and under his guidance reached the stepping-stones. His eyes were on the jungle continuously as though he feared lest the fugitive should spring out upon them.

They crossed the torrent and climbed the hill towards his cave. After they had passed the track that led to the monkey rocks Nahgoo felt easier in his mind. There was less chance of meeting the murderer.

Not knowing where she lived, he concluded that he had better take her to his own dwelling. A few hours' rest might restore her memory. In her present state of confusion she was quite unable to say where she came from. Even if she could speak coherently she could only do it in her own tongue, which he would not understand.

After he had fulfilled the order laid on him by the Inspector and had, so to speak, handed over the fugitive to the police, he would go to Mr. Oakley and ask him to come and assist the lady. He would know where she lived and arrange for her return home. When the effect of the drug had worn off she would sleep, and the pain she must be feeling would be lessened.

With infinite care he guided her steps, half carrying her where the way was steep. It was a long walk, and he was tempted at times to throw her across his shoulder and carry her as he would have carried a log of firewood. But he succeeded in reaching the cave with his arm about her waist and her feet on the ground.

Arrived at the cave, she needed no invitation to throw herself upon the charpoy. The atmosphere of the cave was saturated with the wood smoke of years. She required no mosquito curtain to protect her. All poochees, a generic name for insects of any kind, had long ago been smoked out.

Presently she fell into a deep sleep. The old man looked at her with a grunt of satisfaction. For the space of four or five hours she would continue to sleep, and he might safely leave her while he went back to the duties the Inspector had imposed upon him.

But first he must eat. There was some rice left from last night. This he had intended to heat up for his midday meal. He decided not to wait, but to eat it cold. Then he tidied the place noiselessly. He glanced at the sun as a civilised man would look at the clock and left the cave.

He moved away, taking the path that led to the monkey rocks, where he made sure that he would find the man with the knife, and be able to mark him down definitely for the police.

By this time it was midday. Don, in ignorance of all that had taken place, had breakfasted and gone to the tea-house for the couple of hours' work that he had promised himself with his tea-maker.

It was on his return to the bungalow that the sight of Estelle's horse and syce suddenly aroused his fears; and he came to the conclusion that she was lost in the jungle.

* * * * *

Don was in two minds. Should he follow the path to the clearing first, in the hope of finding a trace of her among the tea? She might have sprained her ankle and be lying helpless on the way. But in such a case she would surely call for help, and her call would be heard by the coolies at work. If she had left the estate and had wandered in the jungle, Don knew so little of its intricacies that he could not hope to find her unaided. It would be far wiser to set the old Gipsy to work; and the sooner he could do it the better.

He took the shortest way to the cave, hoping that Nahgoo would be within hail. Strong and healthy as a seasoned old stag, the Gipsy would probably be out on his daily quest cutting wood. Or he might be journeying to the foot of the hills on some errand of his own.

It was only on one or two occasions that Don had been to the cave. The old man usually came to him, to the bungalow or to the tea-house to deliver firewood. With such a landmark as the Peak it was not difficult to find the cave. He had never been inside, but had spoken with Nahgoo outside. On arrival he gave the warning cry:

"Hi, there! Is anyone in?"

He received no reply. He called a second time with no better result. At a loss to know what next to do—every hour was precious at this time of day—he began to move away with a vague idea of going towards the zigzags. Possibly he might meet coolies passing up towards the plateau with goods for the bazaar; he could enquire of them. Then, again, it was improbable that she would have wandered any great distance. She would not have the strength to go far. He turned back, convinced that it would be wise to remain near the Gipsy's domicile.

He stepped inside the cave. The only light it received was from the entrance and a little rift at its farther end. It seemed full of deep shadows. The brilliant sunshine had dazzled him. At first he could distinguish nothing. Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness, and he could make out the shape of the Gipsy's dwelling.

Firewood lay promiscuously against the walls where it had been thrown down to dry. Beyond were the old man's cooking pots. Still further in the dimness he could make out the shape of the primitive charpoy, the four-legged cot on which the old man slept.

There he was taking his siesta!

Don was sorry to have to disturb him, but it was a matter of importance which could not be delayed.

He went up to the cot with the intention of awaking him. The occupant stirred and gazed at him with eyes in which there was no recognition. It was Estelle.

Her face bore the marks of blood, but he could see no open wound. Her forehead was badly bruised, as if she had sustained a fall. Her wrist was bound with a stained handkerchief.

"Estelle! How did you get here?"

She did not reply, but glanced round vaguely.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, laying a hand on hers.

"I think I must have had a fall," she said slowly. "I ought to be getting back to my father. He will be wondering where I am."

She sat up with difficulty. He was obliged to help her. She made an effort and gained her feet, but she was stiff and sore. She clung to him, and he felt her quiver as she moved.

"Hadn't you better rest a little longer?" he asked.

"No, no. I must go at once."

She began to move towards the light. He was relieved to see that she could walk. It showed that she had no broken bones.

"Queer place, this," she said to herself. "I don't know how I shall find my way home. I wonder if Oakley is anywhere about with the car."

"I will show you the way home," he said quietly, realising that something had happened to make her delirious.

"Thanks, that's very kind of you. Find Oakley if you can."

He guided her steps to the entrance of the cave. When they were outside she glanced from side to side in confusion.

"This way," he said, slipping his arm round her. She made no resistance to his authority, but resigned herself entirely to his direction.

Once or twice he spoke. She answered him shortly and at random. He concluded that she had met with some accident by which she had injured herself, and she was suffering from shock. After a steep bit of climbing he halted to allow her to take breath.

"Estelle darling, do you know me?" he asked.

"I think I know your face, but I can't recall your name."

"I am Don. Don't you remember me? Don Oakley?"

"To be sure! But I can't recollect where we met."

Her words were conventional. There was no comprehension of the situation. Her mind was a blank and her memory was gone.

He was anxious to get her back to the bungalow, but he had a task before him. Fortunately she could walk. He dared not leave her. In her present state she might wander into the jungle and get lost in such a way that she would not easily be found again. He blamed himself for not having brought one of the syces with him. When he started it was with no thought of finding her himself. He was relying on the assistance of the Gipsy, who would be competent to do all that was required.

"I hope my father will not be uneasy," she said as Don again called a halt.

"I am sure he will not have missed you."

They resumed their walk. The bungalow was not far off now. Her steps were becoming more feeble, and she stumbled frequently, although the path was much improved.

"Only a little way to go now," he said encouragingly.

She leaned her head against his shoulder.

"I wish we could find Don."

"Darling, I am here," he cried in distress.

"Thank you very much, but I do so want Don."

Then the tears began to fall. He did what he could to comfort her, but he was not very successful. He knew what was the cause of her tears, and he cursed himself over and over again for his treatment of her advances at her visit on Sunday morning. He had made her unhappy. What a selfish brute he had been, thinking only of his own personal vanity. If only he could convince her of his identity.

It was too late. She had given him his opportunity and he had rejected it.

Smith met them at the foot of the veranda steps. Don made a sign to him to be silent. Together they helped her into the bungalow and led her to the room next to that occupied by Smith. She allowed herself to be placed on the bed.

Uncle James bent over her and examined her closely.

"What has happened to you, my dear?" he asked.

She did not answer. The effort of walking back, even though Don had half carried her, had been too much. She relapsed into unconsciousness.

"She must have had a fall or a shock of some kind. She has hurt herself," said Smith.

Don busied himself with the injured wrist. He removed the bloodstained handkerchief. A clean-cut flesh wound was revealed. It recommenced bleeding.

The two men rendered first aid to the best of their ability, using soft towels and cold water.

Don brought some brandy and put it to her lips. He raised her head gently from the pillow. Her brow was beginning to discolour and the dark patches were creeping down to the jaw and neck. She must have received a severe blow, but whether from a fall or an assault they could not tell.

Wet handkerchiefs and eau-de-Cologne were used. Once she moaned, but otherwise she remained silent and unconscious. Suddenly a cry escaped Don's lips. He pointed to her neck.

"Look! She has been robbed! Her pearls are gone!"

CH. XXVI. THE THIEF

CASSIM had secured the pearls by an astounding bit of good luck. Much as he had desired them he had never dreamt that an opportunity would occur for him to take them. And now the lady had placed herself in his hands completely. His one regret was that he had not silenced her with death; but without a weapon murder had proved impossible. With a knife it might have been effected. With a rope he might have strangled her, or even squeezed the life out of her with his hands, but he was pressed for time.

Cassim had no knowledge of the forest nor could he steer a way by the points of the compass. Under the canopy of foliage there was very little sky visible, and what there was could only be seen overhead. The jungle has no horizon. Even the wind cannot be relied on. It shifts with draughts and blows capriciously up and down the wooded gorges.

His only hope of finding his way out of the forest was by following one of the beaten tracks used by coolies passing from the coast into the hills. With the police on the watch this could only be done with any safety at night, and then it would not be an easy task.

He had little choice in direction. He must get out of the hills and into the low country that extends between the Western Ghauts and the sea, a hot, damp district with few roads and a wide stretch of cultivated fields for the most part swamped with irrigation.

In spite of the difficulties with which he was faced Cassim was full of exultation. He was confident that he would be able to find his way to some port where he could get on board a coaster. He had been troubled on leaving Oodiya at the thought of having such small means for the long journey he contemplated taking. It would have to be far enough to put him out of reach of the British India police. With the pearls in his pocket all anxiety on that score was at an end. His prospects were greatly improved. By trading away a pearl or two he would be supplied with money enough to cover any travelling expenses that he might incur.

If he let it be known that he was a gem mercha it would excite no surprise if he tendered goo instead of money. He might not, in his necessit get his full value, but this could not be helped. H would not waste precious time haggling ove them.

He would have to be cautious where he sought a lodging. He would not be safe in the public rest-house, where every traveller must know the business of his fellows before he can lie down to sleep.

He was still masquerading as a Muhammadan, with his koodimi concealed under the skull cap. If he found himself in the company of men of that race he would have to be careful in maintaining his disguise. On one point he was assured, that he must make his way to Persia or Ceylon as speedily as possible.

Cassim was tired and hungry. He could stave off hunger by chewing betel again, of which he had a small supply. For his fatigue rest was absolutely necessary. He must find some secluded spot off the beat of travellers where he might safely sleep till sunset.

He was not familiar with the jungle and had no knowledge of its paths. Except for going to the local market he had rarely left the estate. He had never been to the Gipsy's cave. His acquaintance with the old man was limited to seeing him at the kitchen door and cheating him out of the few annas that had been honestly earned.

Bombay was Cassim's birthplace. He was intimately acquainted with it and had originally intended passing all his life there, doing office work, for which he was well paid.

Jealousy over a woman resulted in an exceptionally brutal murder of his rival with revolting features of savagery about it. The crime made the town too hot for him, and if he was taken he would suffer the full penalty of the law.

It was maddening to have had his turban knocked off his head and his disguise exposed. He felt morally certain that it was not an accident. It had revealed the sign of his nationality, and everyone present had understood his reason for hiding it.

A Hindu has no desire to conceal his religion. He must have a very good reason for attempting such a course to adopt it, and Cassim was furious with himself for having failed in his effort. It was not the police who had penetrated his disguise but this contemptible jungle-wallah who owed him a grudge.

His mind reverted to the knife. It was a great loss. He was now totally unarmed. It would be necessary to replace it as soon as possible. The recollection of the knife brought his thoughts back to the Englishwoman.

How strong she was! And how she fought! If he had not been in such a hurry to get possession of the pearls he would have quieted her for ever with a thrust of the knife before she could have wrested it from him. He should have killed her first and robbed her afterwards. An Indian woman, he thought resentfully, would have given in at once in sheer terror to an attack such as he had made.

Then there was her scream when his hand on her throat relaxed. It was loud and penetrating, and it had been answered by the police, of course. Who else could it have been? It was just as well he did not delay. He had accomplished his purpose in securing the gems. What did it matter whether the Englishwoman lived or died?

Cassim glanced round the enclosed little valley which he had hurriedly entered. There was no path through it as far as he could see. It was quiet and peaceful and seemed the very spot where a tired man might lie in safety during the daylight. The floor of the valley was dotted with groups of shrubs that afforded ample cover. The rampart of rock in which the monkeys had their nests, rose abruptly in a semicircle at the end of the valley. He went up to it to look for trace of a path by which anyone could descend or ascend. It was all sheer precipice and without a sign of a possible footway. At the entrance the mountain stream widened into the pool in which the monkeys bathed. He drank some water and passed on to the farther end of the arena.

He chose a thick bush growing near the base of the cliff and seated himself behind it. He felt secure from attack at the back. All he had to do was to keep a watch on the entrance of the valley—the way by which he had come.

The pearl necklace had been dropped into the pocket of his coat. He took it out and examined it. He had not much knowledge of gems, but no Indian is entirely ignorant of their value. They form a part of the family wealth and are necessary in all wedding ceremonies. If a family does not actually possess personal ornaments they are hired for the occasion.

Cassim's eyes glistened with greed as he passed the pearls through his fingers. He enjoyed the gratification of feeling their silky smoothness. He gloated over their gleaming purity as they lay on his ochre palm. The counting of them was another pleasure. It was done over and over again until he had the exact number by heart. He examined each one separately, appraising the value and deciding which he would part with first. They were flawless and must be worth the lâk of rupees as the ayah had mentioned to the syce.

But he would not get all that for them. The most he might hope for was half the sum. It would be more than sufficient to take him out of the country and set him up in some business that would be far more profitable than work at a clerk's desk.

Now he must hide them securely somewhere on his person.

An Indian usually carries his valuables in his turban. It is the part of his dress that he guards more closely than any other. He had a small bag at his waist under his coat. In this he kept his betel, his keys, and loose money. He frequently had to pull it out as a purse is used. Although he was careful, it was not impossible for it to be dropped, or for the contents to be observed. A five rupee note was lying in a fold of his turban. The pearls should share its hiding-place.

For some time he was busy, sitting cross-legged with the turban on his lap. His koodimi was safely concealed under the skull cap, which he did not remove. He arranged the necklace in the innermost fold, pinning the upper fold over it so that its shape should not betray its presence.

A slight sound above startled him. He looked up but could see nothing. He took it to be some bird rustling the foliage. It was a small monkey returning to its nest after its morning forage for food. Cassim had not heard of the monkey's colony. If he had been aware of its existence he would not have been alarmed. Monkeys could do him no harm. It was the police he had to fear.

Having disposed of his treasure and satisfied himself that he was alone, he made himself as comfortable as he could. Once more the consciousness of hunger assailed him. It was past the hour for his midday meal: a chicken curry, he remembered—a dish to which he was partial. His departure from Oodiya had been too abrupt to think of bringing away anything to eat. He chewed some more betel, which staved off the cravings for food. The betel brought a kind of waking dreaminess that was next best to sleep.

The turban was replaced on his head with its precious addition of the pearls, and he composed himself to wait and watch as well as he could in the warm drowsiness of his retreat—to wait for the twilight, under cover of which he might venture to creep away, and to watch for the police, who must by this time have organised some sort of search, beginning at the foot of the hills and working upwards.

He wished that he dared sleep. His eyes became heavy under the early afternoon sun. The only relaxation he ventured to allow himself was to lean back against the base of the rock and let his head rest on the wall.

Through the foliage of the bush he had chosen for his screen he had a view of the entrance of the valley. He caught sight of the silvery pool formed by the stream. The temptation seized him to creep down to the water for another drink, but he dared not move away from behind the cover he had chosen.

Now and then he sat up and listened intently. The birds were quiet and the jungle was under the spell of the silence that reigns over it from twelve o'clock till three in the day. The wild creatures, the deer and jackals and smaller animals, were resting, standing or lying in their shady lairs, lazily brushing away the flies. They were not asleep. Their ears were alert and their sense of smell was on guard.

Even the breeze had died down. It had rustled and blustered through the forest ever since the sun rose. Towards sunset it would rouse itself again into activities and usher in the night with the same rustling and blustering.

The tropical, drowsy hush of those three hours laid its heavy hand on Cassim. In spite of his vigilance his eyelids drooped, and at last they closed over his tired eyes.

CH. XXVII. THE PEARLS ARE AGAIN STOLEN

ONE by one the monkeys returned from their daily forage for food. Down towards the foot of the hills they had trooped in the morning, not in a body, but as the humour dictated. They went at a leisurely pace, springing from tree to tree along tracks on the tree-tops made with constant use. Occasionally they came to the ground. Titbits were picked up on the way, little fat grubs under the bark, a few berries here and there. They were like a lot of care-free children of the sun, good-natured and supremely selfish.

They feasted on the ripe fruit of the banyan trees and stole nuts from the palms. When they had eaten their fill and had drunk at the stream they returned to their nests. One and two at a time they came to the rampart of rocks by almost invisible tracks that tunnelled through the foliage where it was thickest and afforded the best cover. Now and then they chased each other and scuffled among the branches; but, like most wild animals, they travelled with little noise and did their best to avoid observation.

They reached their roosting-places without having to pass through the bottom of the valley. Cassim was thus unconscious of their proximity. But as they crept over the crest of the cliff and slipped quietly down into the fissures and cracks of the warm rocks they scented the presence of a human being. Their sense of smell was good enough to tell them that this was not their old friend of the cave, the giver of over-ripe bananas and trimmings of sugar-cane. This was a stranger.

The leader was new to its position and inclined to assert itself. It was restless and uneasy at the presence of Cassim. For some time it sat very still, regarding him suspiciously. Secure in its perch up above it showed no animosity, but it was on the defensive. As nothing alarming happened it gained confidence. Curiosity filled its inquisitive little mind.

What was the stranger doing there? He had brought no food. They were inclined to resent his presence.

The curiosity of the rest of the monkey-folk was raised. Instead of curling themselves up in the sun to sleep like so many dogs they sat up all ears and eyes and noses. They took their cue from their leader, following his example closely. Beyond a little sniffing and whimpering among themselves they remained still and silent.

Finding that the strange human being was even quieter than they were, a slight restlessness came over them. The leader was the only one that ventured to move. It sidled along the ledge on which its own fissure opened. The rest remained acutely watchful and alert.

The big monkey presently decided that the time had come to make further investigations and find out if there were any remains of food left by the stranger.

It lowered itself down the face of the cliff, clinging to the projections of rock and the scrubby vegetation rooted into the interstices. It was not easy even for a monkey familiar with the place to do this. For a human being it was an impossible climb.

The leader was closely followed by two or three others as bold and daring as itself. They moved with the same care, stopping instantly if a dry twig or a tiny fragment of rock was disturbed.

They were not immediately above Cassim. Their natural cunning kept them away from the spot where the dropping of a pebble might betray their presence.

Do animals think? If so, monkeys' brains have a lightning action. The action is so quick that it is impossible to follow the line of thought. Monkeys' acts are the materialisation of impulses. In their wild state they are never aggressive, but the spirit of mischief influencing them is extraordinary. If molested and cornered they will bite and scratch like a wounded cat, but they prefer on the first sign of danger to stampede into a place of safety.

Lower they came with silent, cautious movements, keeping close watch on the motionless figure below. His appearance puzzled them. Their old friend Nahgoo never wore anything but a small loin cloth tightly bound about his hips. If it rained he threw a nigger-brown blanket over his shoulders. The stranger was clothed in a close-fitting coat, which offered no attraction.

The little people's eyes were caught and held by the white muslin turban. There was a line of gold running through the stuff that glittered in the sun. It fascinated them.

Nearer and lower crept the leader, sidling along like a lizard on a wall, prepared to scramble back up the face of the cliff at the slightest movement of the dozing man.

A long, hairy arm was extended downwards and a hand closed on the turban with a strong, sinewy grip. Gently it was lifted from Cassim's head, and in another second it was carried aloft out of his reach.

As Cassim felt the turban being removed he started up in a panic of apprehension, believing that the police were upon him. He clutched at it and turned round sharply to see who was the thief. A long tail was whisked up just out of his reach. He was not quick enough. The action alarmed the thief. With a low growl that was curiously human it scuttled upwards in the direction of its nest, carrying the turban with it. It was followed by its companions, no longer quiet and suspicious, but full of excitement and determination to share in the plunder.

Cassim came out of his daydreams to face a catastrophe. As soon as he found that his assailants were not the dreaded police, but only a band of mischievous monkeys, his panic gave place to rage.

He sprang at the cliff, trying in vain to climb up its face. He shouted at the little people, alternately cursing and conjuring them to restore his property.

It was useless. They showed their teeth like irritated dogs over a bone. His words of abuse or entreaty meant nothing. The sound of his voice brought out the rest of the colony. They caught the excitement and joined in the snarling and growling, dividing their attention between the thief with his treasure and the raging owner of the turban at the base of the cliff.

The possessor of the turban, having reached a safe position, turned its new acquisition over and examined it with a ludicrous gravity, its little mind running on food that might possibly be hidden in its folds. Fold after fold was plucked away and torn to shreds. Other monkeys came to inspect and pry, rousing the jealousy of the thief. It was unable to protect its loot, and bits of the turban were carried away to other nests.

The thief succeeded in retaining the last fold. Something hard inside the muslin suggested nuts. Cassim had fastened in the pearls with pins. The monkey pricked its fingers. With a scream of pain it dropped the remnant on the ledge where it had been sitting.

Another seized the rejected treasure. A second and a third caught hold of it, and there was a struggle. More fingers were pricked and more squeals resulted. The muslin was torn to shreds and the pearls fell out. One of the monkeys snatched up the necklace and tried to crack the gleaming nuts. Finding them hard and unfit for eating, it allowed the uninteresting object to slip from its fingers on to the ledge.

The sunlight fell on the pearls, and their white gleam attracted the leader. It leaped at the smaller animal that had been playing with the necklace, grabbed the pearls, and ran to its nest.

None of the other animals dared to follow nor to dispute its possession of the gems. They continued to fight over the fragments of muslin, biting and tearing it to bits. The treasury note was caught as it was floating away and was torn and half-eaten and quarrelled over like the pearls.

Cassim's eyes from below followed the course of the raid in an agony of fury and despair. He ran along the base of the cliff searching for a track by which he might reach the fissure into which he had seen the necklace carried. Nowhere could he find foothold for more than four or five feet. After two or three falls he had to give it up.

The monkeys observed his action and were instantly on the defensive. Some of the bolder of the troop came down the face of the rock, swinging themselves along and taking flying leaps from ledge to ledge.

"The pearls! The pearls! Give me my pearls!" implored Cassim, wellnigh beside himself with despair, for he knew that they could not comprehend what he said.

Closer they approached, growing bolder each minute that passed. They gibbered and scolded at him, giving him back curses in their own language for his execrations. One of them, braver than the rest, caught at his coat. In another minute it was torn from his back and in shreds like the turban. His shirt was treated in the same fashion, but his white pyjama-trousers were left untouched. Perhaps the little people were not aware that they were detachable. His betel bag was plucked away and the contents scattered beyond recovery.

Rage, impotent, ungovernable fury, seized him at this last insult. He was now nearly naked and penniless. Could he have laid his hands on any of the mischievous little folk, terrible indeed would have been his revenge. He would have done them to death with every cruelty imaginable, blinding and strangling them as he had served the victim of his jealousy. It was well for them that they kept out of his reach.

Exhausted with his useless efforts to climb the rampart, he became sullen and still. The rage left him and black despair took its place. It rendered him almost indifferent—but not quite.

A sudden call stirred him into life again. It was the call that answered the scream of the English girl. The instinct of self-preservation awoke. He glanced about him for its origin, with an impulse to hide himself and make his escape.

The cry came from a height above. His eyes searched the slopes of the valley. High up at the other end of the cliff, a side that had little sun and consequently little attraction for the monkeys, Cassim could distinguish the form of the Gipsy.

The old man was sitting on his heels looking down into the valley. How long had he been there? Was it possible that he had been watching the discomfiture of the butler and the loss of his turban? The thought was maddening.

Cassim made a frantic sign to the old man to come to his assistance, but Nahgoo continued to gaze at him stolidly, never stirring a limb. Again the Gipsy sent out the loud and penetrating "Hoo-hoooh!" of the hillman.

Was he calling to the police, giving them a signal that might draw them to the spot?

The fugitive was inclined to make a bolt of it, but there was only one way open to him. Since it was impossible to climb up the cliff that way lay by the pool at the opening of the valley, the way by which the police would come.

Nahgoo had sent forth his summons. Like a spectator in an amphitheatre he settled himself comfortably on his seat to wait and watch.

What was he waiting for?

CH. XXVIII. THE ROGUE ELEPHANT INTERVENES

The police had turned out in force that morning after receiving news of the detection and escape of the criminal. Other information had been brought which held them up, however, and delayed their operations.

Hayward had sent news to Hillary that his trackers had marked down the rogue elephant. It had again come northward, and was working its way in an erratic line into the district, climbing in and out of valleys and over ridges, which would bring it to the zigzags and the torrent. All coolies travelling up to the bazaar were warned to seek some place of safety and wait until Mr. Hayward, the well-known hunter, had killed it. He was tracking it down and hoped to shoot it by sunset.

When the Gipsy had heard the trumpeting of the rogue he had responded to it with the deliberate intention of drawing it up to the monkey rocks. If once it found its way to the spot Cassim's iniquities would be requited without the assistance of the law.

At present Cassim was ignorant of the impending danger. He could only think of the precious gems that he had lost and of their possible recovery. If he could explain to the Gipsy and prevail on him to go to the monkeys' nests he might get back the pearls. He would offer the old man a good reward, something very different from the few annas that he had doled out so unwillingly for the firewood.

It would have taken much to tempt Nahgoo to leave the safety of his perch. He had already been at close quarters with the rogue, and had no wish to renew the acquaintance.

Meanwhile the elephant was making its way up the valley. It was cooling its feet in the stream and trampling down the undergrowth on the banks and on the hill-sides as the madness of its rage moved it. It churned up the water with its feet; it blundered and crashed through bushes and young trees like a bull in a field of beans. Wanton destruction was the spirit that prompted every movement.

Only those who have seen the track made by an elephant in a " must " condition can have any conception of the havoc that it can create with its feet and trunk. It leaves a line of destruction behind it like the course of a typhoon.

Nahgoo was growing a little impatient. He feared that the animal might beat a retreat before the end he so much desired was accomplished. He gave another call. It was heard and taken for a challenge, as it was meant to be. Again there came a response, and this time the trumpeting indicated that the rogue was nearer.

For a short time silence reigned. The fugitive had given up hope that help could be obtained from the Gipsy. Now for the first time his ear caught the ominous sound. He had heard of the rogue in the morning bazaar, where much speculation was caused as to its return to the district among the trades-people, who were obliged to use the ghaut for bringing up their supplies. They had no wish to run into it accidentally, as they were doing transport work up and down the mountain paths.

For the first time Cassim realised the desperate plight he was in. He must get out of the way of the beast. But how? There was only one exit to the valley and that was by the way he had entered. By that very way, if his ears did not deceive him, the rogue was travelling. If it continued its course it must sooner or later reach the spot where he was now cowering in deadly fear.

The little people had heard the trumpeting. They were secure on their ramparts, but they were aware that the rogue would prove no friend if it came their way. It was something to be feared. Monkeys, in the face of danger, are vociferous. They run about in a purposeless manner, leaping, climbing, and gibbering until the trouble is over, catching the branches of bushes and shaking them violently, jostling each other like a crowd of frantic children.

The usual racket began. Every monkey was out of its nest at the sound of the elephant. They growled and whimpered and showed their teeth, tearing about with open mouths and extended tails in their excitement.

A snorting scream somewhere near the entrance of the valley set the monkeys racing faster than ever, their tails out, their four hands gripping rock and herbage as if their last moment had come.

Cassim glanced at them in despair. Even if he could have climbed the cliff he would not have ventured into the excited crowd. They would have torn him to bits as they tore his coat and shirt. He ceased the efforts he had resumed of trying to find a foothold on the cliff and turned his face in the direction from which the rogue would come. Looking towards the entrance he could see the jungle agitated by the movements of the cumbrous animal. He could also hear the crashing of the branches and stems of the saplings.

He crawled into one of the clumps of vegetation hoping that it might hide him from view. He had no knowledge, being a city man, of the instinctive gifts of the forest creatures and considered only sight and sound. He forgot, if he ever knew, the marvellous sense of smell that they possess.

The elephant, after trampling about in the pool, sniffed the air. It scented the enemy who had dared to defy it by responding to its trumpetings. Mischief for mischief's sake was abandoned. Its attention was concentrated upon one object only—the destruction of the man who had sent out the challenge.

In the old days a former ruler of Mysore had a way of executing his prisoners and criminals who were condemned to death. It was Tippu Sultan, known for his barbarity as the Mysore Tiger. These unfortunate men died under the feet of his elephants while he looked on and revelled in their death agonies.

In the old palace of the fort at Bangalore the durbar hall still exists. Its condition is very little changed since the time when the Sultan was living there. A large dais projects from a gallery, and is supported like a bracket on the wall. It is high up and out of reach of the trunks of the elephants. The animals naturally became excited over their ghastly work, and were ready to destroy every human being within their reach before they had finished. Their mahouts alone could control them and drive them back to their stables.

The gallery is screened. It was for the use of the ladies of the harem. The Sultan took his seat on a pile of cushions on the dais. From it he had a view of the hall below.

The wretched men who were condemned to die were brought into the hall and left there. The elephants, guided by their mahouts, were introduced. The doors were closed and the tragedy began.

A human being can sprint faster than an elephant is able to run at starting. The man can turn and swerve, dodging the feet raised to crush him. But after a time his strength and agility fail and he becomes exhausted. A fall, or only a lessening of his powers, brings the end, and every bone in his body is broken by the weight of those terrible feet.

Nahgoo on his elevated seat, like Tippu Sultan, watched for the playing out of the tragedy. There was no need to repeat his call. He could leave matters now to take their course.

Again he settled down on his heels, prepared to wait for the end that should give him his revenge. With the old Tiger of Mysore it was a pastime to see men done to death by his elephants. With the Gipsy it was a paying off of old scores. He had seized the unexpected opportunity of compassing the butler's death as the butler had seized the chance of stealing Estelle's pearls.

The elephant stood at the entrance of the valley. Its trunk swayed backwards and forwards to pick up the scent. Its ears moved restlessly as it listened for sounds, and its wicked little eyes shone with bad temper and devilish cunning. It was aware that it had its victim completely in its power.

With a peevish scream the elephant rolled up its trunk and suddenly charged down the arena. Before it reached the end where Cassim lay it began to do a kind of goose-step with its forefeet, trampling and feeling with its feet for the object of its wrath.

Thud! thud! thud! went the clumsy hoofs as it turned and twisted, charging back and coming round again in its search for its victim.

Cassim dared not remain where he was. The animal was approaching too close to the spot to make it safe. He rose to his feet and bolted down towards the entrance. The rogue was after him and headed him back.

The game had begun. The old Gipsy followed every move as spectators watch a game of polo, sitting on his perch like a big bird of prey.

The noise of the elephant's angry grunts and Cassim's cries for help as he dodged the big beast and ran from one shelter to another, brought out every monkey in the place, young and old. Wild with fear and excitement they scrambled and leaped about the rocks, screaming with terror.

One of them lost its footing and fell close to the rogue. Before it could recover its feet and spring up the cliff to safety its little life was crushed out of it and every bone in its body broken. At the sight of the accident the monkeys yelled with terror and stampeded to the top of the cliff, where they took cover in the jungle.

Cassim tried again and again to reach the entrance of the valley. If only he could make his escape down the stream, he thought it possible that he might find some place on the mountain-side where he could hide till the beast had worked off its fury.

He sprinted towards the pool once more. The rogue with infinite cunning headed him back with a vicious charge. As he turned and bolted it came after him, stopping short to block the way and cut off his retreat. If he stood still it advanced upon him with the horrible thud-thudding of trampling feet.

Cassim was losing his breath and becoming unnerved. He felt that he could not keep up the continuous sprinting. Moreover, he was conscious of being gradually cornered against the cliff. His chances of escape were becoming more and more restricted. The elephant was preparing to make another charge, from which the wretched man felt that there could be no escape.

With a desperate leap he tried once more to scale the cliff. Catching at some rough vegetation growing out of the rock, he made a frantic effort to haul himself up hand over hand out of reach of the elephant.

He forgot the height of the great creature and the long reach of its trunk. With a scream it ran up and seized him by the waist, battering him against the rock as Cassim had battered Estelle but with considerably more force.

Then it carried him off to the pool and hurled him with terrific strength into the water. It stood on the edge of the pool watching for his reappearance. But the fugitive had been rendered unconscious by the rough treatment he had received, and the water put an end to his life, a more merciful death than he would have had could the elephant have recovered possession of him and got him under its feet.

While the rogue stood motionless watching for its victim, like a terrier at a rat hole, a bullet from Jack Hayward's rifle cut short its devastating career. The bullet, fired by an experienced marksman, entered its brain. Its great knees sagged, and it pitched forward on its head and died.

With the same strange indifference to life and death the Gipsy rose to his feet. A sigh of satisfaction escaped him. He had nothing to complain of. The show had been as good as he had anticipated. He stood looking at the fallen elephant as though tempted to inspect it at a closer range. The appearance of Hayward's shikaris, who had been tracking it, caused him to change his mind.

The old man turned away, giving up all hope of securing a few coarse hairs from its tail with which he might make an amulet. They were the perquisite of the trackers. He returned to his cave. By this time Estelle had been found by Don and the two had departed.

Satisfied with what he considered an excellent day's work, Nahgoo rolled himself in his blanket and took the sleep that he would have had in the middle of the day but for the interference of business.

CH. XXIX. THE GIPSY IS QUESTIONED

NAHGOO resumed his daily task of cutting firewood. The world might wag as it would. Fuel must be gathered for the kitchens of the planters. The incidents that happened the previous day, with the crowning catastrophe in the monkeys' valley, did not affect him. He slept the sleep of the just, undisturbed by nightmares, and awoke the next morning to his work, which was to deliver a load at Oodiya.

In the servants' bazaar Cassim's assault on the missie, the theft of the pearls, and his death by the rogue elephant were much discussed by domestics and shopkeepers as well as in higher circles. Jack Hayward's success was envied by the young men of the district as well as by a certain number of the older planters.

He was congratulated on all sides. In response he spoke of his good luck, as he called it. The elephant might have fallen to the rifle of the Inspector or to that of any other man.

Nahgoo was questioned. Very little could be got out of the old man. The Oodiya cook eyed him curiously as he stood at the kitchen door waiting for the four annas he was to receive without fail for his bundle. The cook held the money in his hand ready to drop it into the extended palm.

" So the elephant killed Cassim," he said. Nahgoo grunted an assent. " How did it find him?"

" The elephant had a devil inside it, and devils know everything."

" Who tells the devils?—*one anna,*" and the cook dropped two half annas into the outstretched palm.

" The birds, perhaps. The trees, perhaps; or the wild beasts. Who knows the way of the gods?"

" The devil in the elephant listened to the Gipsy —*two annas.*"

Two more half-anna coins were dropped.

" This old man knows nothing," replied Nahgoo as he tied the four coins in a corner of his loin cloth.

"He knows that Cassim tried to kill our missie?"

The Gipsy's dark eyes dwelt on the cook with enquiry. It was not for a jungle-wallah like himself to speak of matters that concerned the Europeans.

"*Three annas*," said the cook, this time doling out four quarter-anna pieces into the cupped hands. "The missie is here in our bungalow. The master sent for a nurse and an ayah. She has been very ill, but this morning she is better and has spoken sense."

Nahgoo tied the four coins in another corner of his loin cloth.

"And the blood? Was she hurt?" he ventured to ask.

"She was wounded by a knife," continued the cook, watching the old man. "She was robbed of a white bead necklace that she was wearing."

"This worm knows nothing," said Nahgoo, recognising an enquiry in the cook's words.

He held out his hands for the last anna. Twelve of the smallest British Indian coins, half the size of a farthing, were dropped into his palm.

"*Four annas*," said the cook. "This is for the bundle brought this morning. It will last two days. The day after to-morrow bring another bundle. It is said that you found the missie in the jungle. Was she wearing her beads?"

"These old eyes cannot see well."

"They can see white beads."

"The missie had blood on her hands and face and dress; but I saw no beads."

"The police are looking for them."

"Have they searched the pool where the elephant drowned Cassim?"

"Yes, and the monkey valley as well. You can go, old father."

Nahgoo returned to his cave. He took his curved billhook from its hiding place and went down to the stepping-stones. He turned off into the trail where he had found Estelle. No one had been that way since he was there. The spot was in the same condition as when he had led her away. The fern was trampled and broken down where the struggle had taken place.

He searched the ground systematically, reaping down the fern as a reaper cuts corn with his sickle, till he had cleared a wide circle round him. After a couple of hours he came upon the object for which he was looking. It was not the necklace. It was the knife, a great find for him and one that he intended to keep to himself. He hid it in the folds of his loin cloth. The police might enquire for the lady's beads, but the knife they would not trouble about. The owner was dead and no one would ask for it. He continued his search, but could discover no trace of the white beads, which he had good reason to believe were elsewhere. He had a vague recollection of seeing them in the hands of the monkeys.

He returned to his cave. It was time to prepare the meal of the day. He lighted the fire with a flint and the back of an old kitchen knife, and proceeded with his cooking. In the interval he sat in deep thought. He was going over the events of the previous day when Cassim was done to death by the rogue. They were impressed on his memory, but many of the details had little import at the time. He was too much absorbed in the anticipated climax, when the hated criminal should meet with the fate that eventually overtook him, to take note of anything else.

He recalled the theft of the turban by the monkeys, the tearing of the muslin to shreds, the tossing to and fro of a white object that fell from its folds. This must have been the necklace stolen from the missie. He was ignorant of its value, even though he had heard the beads called pearls. Pearls and gems did not come his way. The jewels of his tribe were cowrie shells, glass beads, and brass bangles.

What became of the beads? He remembered that the young monkey leader seized them and ran off in the direction of its nest. Nahgoo was familiar enough with the ways of the little people to be aware that they cared for nothing but food. A brilliant object might attract their eyes for a short time, but the plaything would soon be thrown aside. Probably the necklace was lying unnoticed in the leader's nest with nutshells and banana-skins and other rubbish.

It would not be difficult to find it if it was there, but how was he to get at it? Familiar as he was with the tribe, he had never ventured to intrude or even approach very near to their sleeping places.

Since the old one had died the little people had been shy of him and not very friendly. They took their cue from the leader, with whom Nahgoo had not yet established pacific relations.

He missed his old friend. They had been on terms such as might exist between a man and a dog of not too easy a temper, a dog from which he would not have ventured to take a bone. He had made advances to the young monkey, but up to the present they had been received with snarls and unfriendliness.

The following morning Nahgoo went to the market. He bought ghee (butter) and curry stuff. He waited till the servants had left—the arrogant cooks and the supercilious butlers—then he bought and begged the refuse from the fruit stalls. He also purchased some coarse rice sold as chicken's food.

The chief topic of bazaar gossip was still the attack on Miss Talbot, the theft of her pearls, and the violent death of the thief. Nahgoo also learnt that the bead necklace was worth a great deal of money and that a reward was offered for its recovery.

The old man was closely questioned as to the part he had played in the tragedy. Had he called and signalled to the elephant to come up that particular way? Everyone knew that rogue elephants roamed only to do mischief. They were "running amûk" to kill and destroy without sense. The police who were following Mr. Hayward declared that someone had called and that the elephant answered.

Where were the pearls likely to be? he was asked several times. The pool had been searched and the monkey valley explored, but no trace of them could be found.

Nahgoo professed to be unable to give any information. He had seen nothing; he had heard nothing; he was only a poor old man getting very blind and very deaf. The more he was questioned the more stupid he appeared.

"Did you see the butler by the pool?" one man enquired. "It was there, they say, that the elephant caught him."

The old man kept silence.

"One of the constables declared that he was taken near the stepping-stones as he was running down the ghaut with the elephant after him," said another. "Was it so, old father?"

"Can't say," replied Nahgoo, blinking his eyes in perplexity.

"If the rogue seized hold of him there why did it carry him to the monkey's pool?" asked a third.

"The constable said that it was lucky Cassim was in the way. The elephant might have killed one of the police."

"How could it have done so? The police were safe behind Mr. Hayward and his rifle."

There was a laugh at the expense of the constables. It was useless to appeal to Nahgoo for a solution of all the questions that were raised. He snapped his eyes and kept silence as long as he could. If hardly pressed he answered:

"I cannot tell. I was sleeping."

"You saw the elephant?"

"After it was dead, your honour."

The old man edged away to a stall, where he bought a lump of jaggery (black treacle). He balanced a bunch of damaged bananas on his head, and, having stowed away the treacly compound with the rice, ghee, and curry stuff, he departed, glad to escape from domestics, shopkeepers, and coolies.

CH. XXX. THE PEARLS CHANGE HANDS YET AGAIN

NAHGOO returned to his dwelling. He cooked the coarse rice with some of the treacle and butter, boiling it to the consistency of a pudding. Wrapping it in green leaves he placed it in his sack.

It was the hour when the little people straggled back from their feeding grounds to play about in the sun or take a siesta.

The Gipsy scattered the bananas over the ground at the foot of the cliff. Then he sat down at a little distance and began the soft tremolo whistle to which the old monkey had never failed to respond. Gradually they gained confidence and came down for the fruit they so dearly loved.

They had barely recovered from their panic. Some of the larger animals were still distrustful, although the Gipsy was no stranger to them.

He knew the little people better than to expect gratitude from them or any acknowledgment of benefits conferred. All he aimed at was to gain their confidence. Living alone in the jungle he would have made an effort to become friendly with the deer and the birds if it could have been effected. But they were all too shy to receive advances from a human being.

He waited patiently for some time and was rewarded by seeing the young leader approaching. It had been slow in showing itself. As soon as it caught sight of the old man it snarled, stuck out its long tail stiffly with a curl at the end, and walked away on all fours. Nahgoo continued his whistling and the monkey returned. He made a small pellet of the cooked rice and threw it so that the morsel fell at its feet.

The man and the monkey sat looking at each other. A few minutes elapsed, and it summoned up sufficient courage to pick up the pellet and taste it. It took another short walk round. At the end of its perambulation it solemnly sat down on its haunches, facing the Gipsy like an expectant dog, and waited for more.

A second pellet was given. Two monkeys ventured near hoping to be allowed to share the feast. They were warned off by the leader.

Nahgoo made the rest of the rice into similar dainty mouthfuls. When he had finished he scattered them on the ground in a wide sweep, which necessitated a search on the part of the monkey. While its attention was fully occupied he rose quietly and slipped away.

He ran round to the back of the cliff to the track by which the monkeys sought their nests when they returned from feeding. With the agility of one of the troop he reached the nest once occupied by the old monkey and now appropriated by its successor.

It was a fissure like his own cave, but in miniature. He crept along the narrow ledge and squeezed himself into the entrance. The interior was like the den of any wild animal that had no sense of neatness and order.

He hastily searched the floor, turning over rubbish of all kinds—nutshells, empty corn-cobs, banana-skins, and shreds of material that had once pleased the eye.

There was no sign of the necklace. He was disappointed. It must have been carried off to another nest. Many of the holes in which the monkeys lived were far too small for him to enter and some were inaccessible.

He glanced round the little cavity again, looking up and down and in every direction. The fissure only received light from the entrance. A gleam of white caught his eye. There, hanging on a jagged projection of rock, was the necklace, just as it had been thrown aside by the disappointed monkey when it found that the beads were not fit for food.

Nahgoo sprang towards it, seized it, and thrust it into his sack, which he still carried. Returning quickly towards the entrance he was met face to face by the owner of the cave. The monkey had eaten the rice and was coming back to take its siesta. With a warning growl it blocked the way and showed no inclination to move. Nahgoo had been just a second too late to escape.

Instantly the Gipsy stopped dead and assumed a quietness he was far from feeling. He was in an awkward predicament and he was aware of it. The animal was ill-tempered and still under the influence of previous irritation. To force his way was impossible. The monkey was stronger than he was by several degrees. Its arms had a longer reach and its fingers a more powerful grip. In addition, it was armed with formidable teeth capable of crushing the bones of his hand or his foot.

Every time Nahgoo moved the monkey growled threateningly. He tried to edge his way to the entrance. This brought him nearer to his opponent. He dropped slowly into a sitting position with his back against the wall. The monkey seemed reassured. It ventured inside and sat down close to the entrance, a position that gave it complete command of the way. Every time Nahgoo moved hand or foot the monkey stood up on all fours, showed its teeth, and snarled.

He began to whistle softly. The monkey seated itself again. The whistling suggested food, as was intended. Slowly Nahgoo opened his sack. He had a piece of jaggery remaining. Estelle's pearls were adhering to it. He detached them and transferred them to his betel bag. He was about to replace his betel bag at his waist when a thought struck him. His supply of opium was kept in this bag rolled in a piece of dried palm leaf. He opened the packet, and with the jaggery made some more pillules, some with a dose and some without.

The monkey's attention was once more concentrated on another feast of sweetmeats. Here were some of the dainty morsels that had been too quickly disposed of down below.

Nahgoo threw one of the pellets within its reach. There was no delay this time. It was seized and eaten greedily. Another and yet another followed. All sign of animosity melted away. Again it was a case of the expectant dog and its master.

The pellets were swallowed one after the other. Nahgoo watched closely. He allowed longer intervals to elapse between each. The pills were not all drugged. He was not anxious to kill the monkey. He intended one day to establish friendly relations, but it would take time. Now he only wanted to send it to sleep for a couple of hours.

It was not long before he accomplished his end. The monkey's head drooped, its eyes closed, and it rolled over on its side. Nahgoo rose to his feet and crept out with the pearls. He slipped away unnoticed by the little people, to whom a pearl necklace meant less than an over-ripe banana.

CH. XXXI. LOVE AND THE PEARLS RETURN

"SHOCK and slight concussion of the brain."

This was the doctor's verdict on Estelle. The treatment was to be complete rest and quiet. On no account was she to be excited about anything.

Smith decided to keep her at Oodiya, where the doctor's advice could be carried out without putting their friends to inconvenience. A nurse and an ayah were engaged and brought from the nearest town. Her luggage was sent over, and Estelle found herself invalided and looked after as she had never been before. It was a new rôle and distinctly pleasant. In a few days she recovered her memory, and was able to tell the story of Cassim's attack and his theft of her pearls.

She enquired what had become of him and if he had escaped. Smith thought it best to hide nothing except the unpleasant details of the man's death. She was informed that as he was trying to get out of the jungle he was met by the rogue elephant and was drowned in a pool.

She blamed herself for following Cassim into the jungle, but, as Smith said, she had no reason to doubt the butler's good faith, or to disbelieve the story he told of Don's movements. It was difficult to realise that a highly respectable servant, as he appeared to be, was a murderer and a fugitive from justice.

In ten days' time Estelle was herself again. Youth and a strong constitution had brought her safely through. The nurse might have been dismissed, but being a kindly old body and originally engaged for a month, her services were retained. She was glad to remain in a good climate and was in no hurry to leave.

In one respect Estelle had changed, and the change was troubling Smith more than a little. Her attitude towards Don had altered. She was still gentle and friendly but nothing more. Each time they met there was the same welcoming smile with an expression of pleasure at seeing him. It was conventional, such as might have been expected from any amiable guest who was grateful for his hospitality.

Don looked in vain for the light in her eyes and the welcoming smile that every woman unconsciously gives her lover as he approaches. She had drawn away from him. If he made advances she received them without any response of the same nature. Sometimes Don ventured to kiss her hand or her hair. She looked up and smiled, saying:

"Thank you, dear. You are very good to me."

She responded with exactly the same manner and words if Smith offered the same homage. Don was acutely unhappy. Yet it was no more than he deserved, he told himself, after his rejection of her advances on the Sunday morning when she had ridden over to Oodiya to ask him to marry her.

Smith did not accept it in a spirit of resignation. It distressed him, and he was impatient to find a remedy for her change of attitude. He wanted to shake her out of her apathy and "bring her to her senses," as he termed it. Something of the nature of a slight shock might restore her mental equilibrium, but how it was to be effected he was unable to say.

He ventured to speak, hoping to get in touch again on the subject of Don. He wanted to jog her memory and revive the old spirit that had been the foundation of her visit to India. Although she had not put it into words, she had come out to the East to find the man whom she was convinced loved her as she loved him.

Don had his work to do and, under his uncle's encouragement, was very busy on the estate. Smith and Estelle were left to themselves a greater part of the day. In the mornings they sat in the veranda, from which they had a magnificent view of the slopes of the Western Ghauts, with their deep gorges still in shade. She never tired of gazing at the wide stretches of primeval forest, with their secret places still unexplored by the foot of the white man. In the afternoons they sought the eastern side of the house, from which they looked towards the plateau, with its rolling downs and immense tracts of grassland.

"My dear," said Smith one afternoon, taking his courage in both hands, "don't you want to marry Don?"

Estelle was startled and slightly bewildered.

"I don't think I do," she replied. "My father would not have approved——" She stopped as though trying to collect her thoughts.

"You make a mistake. He liked Don in his way."

"Don himself does not wish it."

She gazed at him with eyes that had lost their sparkle of happiness and hope.

"Are you sure of that?" asked Smith.

"He told me so himself and he has good reasons. He must be right."

"You are wrong—wrong!" cried Smith, unable, now that he had broken the ice, to leave unsaid what was in his mind. "I know for a fact that Don does wish it. He is afraid to speak. You are living in his house and he would be sorry to say anything that could give you pain while you are his guest."

She did not answer immediately. Her brain was busy with the subject. Then she thrust it aside as though the effort of considering it was too great.

"Dearest Uncle James! You are the sweetest old uncle in the world, and I am going to stay with you always and be your daughter. We will have a beautiful garden——"

Smith rose abruptly, laying the stump of his cigar in the ash-tray. A sense of failure oppressed him. Her words, childish and futile, irritated him. When would she awake to the realities of her life? He went into the garden and prowled about the garden-beds, seeing nothing of their beauty.

Don came quickly towards him, his hands full of flowers, roses and lilies.

"Where's Estelle?" he asked.

"She is in the veranda, sitting in her chair half-awake," replied Smith testily.

"Has she been asleep?"

"No, I have been talking to her. It's like talking to a feather pillow. I can't get anything out of her."

Don passed on and laid the flowers on her lap.

"For me?" she cried. "How good you are!"

Her words conveyed nothing more than the gratitude a child might have expressed. He did not answer, but leaned over the back of her chair and kissed her hair. She looked up at him with a sudden trembling of the lips. Smith had touched a chord, but it was faint. The touch was delicately repeated by the gift of the flowers.

Don seated himself by her side. As his eyes rested on her he cursed himself once again for a prig and a fool. He had lost his chance. Women like Estelle do not throw their hearts at men's feet. She had stretched a point by coming to him that memorable Sunday morning when he had driven her away by the rejection of her love. He had talked of money when he ought to have talked of love; of principles when he should have been assuring her of his devotion and giving her ample proof of it.

What did money matter? he asked himself. What did principles matter where a life's happiness was at stake? He had ruthlessly "turned her down." Since her accident she had never once alluded to the subject which she had intended to discuss with him as they returned home through the jungle on the morning when she missed him. There had been no renewal of the pleading, no offer to share her fortune with him so that they might both be happy. And he was at a loss to know what to do to restore matters to their original condition. She had nothing for him but the gentle, friendly smile that he was beginning to dread. She was like some delicate instrument that had been struck violently by the clumsy touch of too heavy a hand and rendered dumb.

The glance she gave him and the sudden quivering of the lips set his heart beating. The doctor had said that it would take time to recover her mental balance; but he had promised that the equilibrium would come. They must be patient and guard against further mental trouble.

Smith, in the anxiety of an old man to have his dearest wishes fulfilled, had said sometimes with a touch of impatience:

"Make love to her, boy! Get on with your job!"

"I can't!" Don had cried with despair. "I can't bully her. I must wait till she herself gives me another chance. At present she has closed the door on me—and serve me right!"

Was the door opening with that quivering of the lips? He leaned forward. The scent of the roses, great yellow tea roses, full of sunshine and perfume, filled the air.

"I have something for you, Estelle," he said.

"More flowers?"

"No, dearest. We have found your pearls."

He drew the necklace from his pocket and laid it on the roses. An exclamation of delight escaped her lips. She lifted the pearls tenderly and laid them against her cheek.

"My pearls! My precious pearls! Where did you find them?"

What is it in pearls that appeals to the feminine taste so strongly? Men do not love them as women do. Estelle was no different from the rest of her kind. She had said little about her loss, but she had felt it deeply, and missed them all through her convalescence.

"They were found in the jungle by the old Gipsy," replied Don. "Cassim must have dropped them. May I put them back in their proper place?"

Without waiting for her consent he circled her neck with the string and pushed the diamond clasp home.

"There! Now you look yourself again," he said, his eyes shining with the love that he was aching to declare.

Her glance dwelt on him longer than usual. Then she dropped her eyes, and a little upright mark appeared on her brow that shadowed a frown.

"What is it, darling? Anything wrong with your necklace?" asked Don.

She did not reply. Her fingers lingered on the pearls, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

"I am afraid the monkeys left the mark of their teeth on one or two of the pearls. You must have them replaced when you get back to London," he said.

Smith had entered the room and was listening. He was longing to return to England. He was satisfied with his manager on the estate, and there was nothing to detain him in India. The word "London" stirred him.

"Ah! yes, I am beginning to hear old London a-calling. Shall we be off one day next week, Estelle, you and I?"

"Oh!" she gasped. "Leave—Oodiya?"

"Well, my dear, I don't intend to be a fixture on these Indian Hills; and apparently you are not inclined to make arrangements for a permanent stay. So off we'll go by the homeward mail from Colombo next week," he said in a cheerful voice.

He had been prowling restlessly about the room as he talked. He turned to his nephew.

"By-the-bye, what about those rubber plants for the new clearing? Let me see the price lists."

Don fetched a fat commercial envelope; the two men sat down and were soon absorbed in prices.

Estelle, her lap full of flowers, lay back for a few minutes. The servant brought in a tray of vases at his master's direction. She rose, gathered up the blossoms, and began to arrange them in the glasses. The peace was suddenly disturbed by the abrupt entrance of the tea-maker. He was a smart young Tamil, usually self-possessed and confident. He was out of breath and spoke with difficulty in his agitation.

"Sir! Sir! Come quickly. The tea-house is on fire! I have ordered water to be poured, but the coolies are frightened. They say it is the devil in the new wire light."

"Bother!" ejaculated Don. "Fused wire, I suppose."

He ran off hatless, the tea-maker following. Smith rose from his chair with less haste and laid the papers he was studying on the table.

"We're insured all right," he said to himself. "All the same, we don't want to be burnt out."

"What's the matter?" asked Estelle, dropping her flowers and coming to him with a white face which startled him. She was still thoroughly upset in her nervous system.

"Nothing's the matter, my dear. You go on with your job."

"But what has happened? Why has Don run off in such a hurry?"

"One of the new electric wires has fused, but Don will soon have it right."

"Oughtn't we to go and help?"

"Certainly not. An old man like me and a girl like you would only be in the way."

She looked at him rebelliously. Then the old Estelle seemed to return. She pulled herself together and regained her self-control, although the hand that held a rose shook.

"You are right, Uncle James. If Don wanted us he would have said so. I remember——" And she told him how he had ordered her out of the room when her father was using bad language. "Don can be very masterful. I had to obey," she concluded.

"And you will find that he will continue to be masterful if he sees fit—after you're married, my dear, after you're married."

Two hours later Don returned safely. The fire was extinguished, but he had been obliged to work strenuously to prevent it from spreading.

"Much damage done?" asked Smith.

"Nothing but what we can easily make good."

"—With the insurance," chuckled the old City man.

"I've burnt my hand," said Don as casually as he could. He did not wish to alarm Estelle. "I caught hold of a bit of blazing wood and wrenched it away before it could do more damage. I had better have my hand attended to."

He glanced towards Estelle, who responded at once. She was soon busy with the household remedies. Uncle James judged it wiser to leave them. He went back to his chair in the veranda, where he found the usual consolation in a cigar.

The hand was successfully dressed and swathed. Don was about to join Smith and give him an account of the accident.

"Thanks, Estelle. I shall do nicely now. The damage is not great."

Suddenly she threw her arms impulsively round his neck.

"Darling! Darling old Don! Thank Heaven you are not hurt."

His lips met hers in a reply that satisfied them both and set at rest all their mutual doubts and misunderstandings.

CH. XXXII. NAHGOO IS SATISFIED. ALSO UNCLE JAMES

It was two or three days later. They had finished tea, and Smith had gone in search of one of his favourite cigars, when the sound of a motor horn heralded Zoe's approach. She precipitated herself from the car and ran up the steps of the veranda, leaving her companion to follow.

"Don! Estelle! Congratulate us!" she cried breathlessly.

"What are we to congratulate you on, my impetuous little grasshopper?" asked Don.

He glanced from Zoe to Billy Onslow, who had followed her more soberly but not less confidently.

"We've won the mixed doubles in the tournament."

"We? You and——?"

"Billy. He's a darling! He played splendidly. The prize is the sweetest little wrist watch you ever saw. I've been wanting one for ever so long."

"And now you've got it," said Billy, beaming at her. He had appreciated being called a darling.

"How are you getting on, Estelle? Coming back to us soon?"

Smith appeared with his cigar as she asked the question. He answered it.

"Estelle will stop here till she and I sail from Colombo."

"Then she is not returning to us," said Zoe in a disappointed voice.

"Better not, as we shall be off in a few days' time. I am taking her straight to Switzerland, where she will be able to build up her strength and make a good recovery."

"What about the touring party?"

"It had to go on without us," said Estelle.

Smith took it upon himself to impart the news which, in his elation, he found impossible to keep to himself.

"And when she has picked up her strength we shall go on to London," he continued.

"Yes?" cried Zoe, feeling that there was more to come.

"Don will join us——"

"Yes? And then?"

"There will be a wedding, and I am going to give her away."

He concluded with the air of a speaker who has brought the house down with some sensational announcement that will shake the spheres. Zoe turned from one to the other.

"Oh, Estelle! Oh, Don!" she cried, not quite sure whether to be pleased or otherwise. Then she added: "You have both been rather dark about it." She turned to Billy for support. "Haven't they?"

"Perhaps we have," admitted Estelle before Billy could collect his thoughts and make a suitable reply.

"You see, we were old friends in England before ever Don came out to the district."

"And you never told us! Mean, I call it!"

"Never mind, Zoe," said Don. "I am sure that Onslow will make a better partner than my unworthy self—at tennis," he added with a laugh.

He glanced at Billy, who was lighting a cigarette and talking to Smith.

"You wouldn't have done half as well in the mixed doubles as Billy," snapped Zoe.

"I am sure I shouldn't. Don't forget the fact when it comes to another sort of partnership," retorted Don with a laugh.

"I shan't talk to you any longer. You're simply horrid!"

She turned swiftly to Estelle. Her eyes caught the gleam of the pearls.

"Oh! Where? How? When?" she cried, the words tumbling over each other.

"The old Gipsy found them in the jungle." Estelle told the tale of their recovery. "They have suffered slightly in the rough handling they have had."

"Congrats, a hundred! You never looked quite yourself without them. We were going to pay the old man a visit, if you remember, but it never came off. I lost all interest in him when I heard that he didn't tell fortunes."

"We shall have to reward him—give him a pension or something."

Zoe, never still for long, jumped up from her chair and called her companion.

"Come along, Billy. We must be getting down to the club to receive our prizes."

She departed in a whirlwind, as she came, refusing tea and forgetting everything in the thought of the much coveted watch which was to be hers.

* * * * *

Hillary, resting on the stone by the entrance of the cave, talked with the old man.

The Inspector, who played his part in another story, is only a passer-by here, and it is not necessary to follow his intense disappointment in not securing his man in the ordinary way. The police prefer to do their own work, and have no thanks to give to those who try to do it for them.

It could not be helped that the rogue elephant took a hand in administering justice to a breaker of the law, but in Hillary's opinion it would have been more satisfactory if Hayward had bagged the beast before it encountered Cassim. The police were held up by the presence of the elephant. They were obliged to wait until it was disposed of. The fugitive was in hiding and would probably not have encountered the rogue had it not been for the Gipsy's call.

Hillary had expressly ordered the old man to keep his eye on the criminal. He was to do nothing more.

Having marked down the man he was to be ready with his information when it was required.

The annoying part was that Nahgoo had kept to the letter of the law and refrained from striking a blow or injuring the criminal. At the same time he had been instrumental in bringing about his death.

"Old father of the forest, did I not tell you to do nothing but mark down the man as you would have tracked a tiger?"

"Your honour said so, and I did nothing but watch."

"You called the elephant."

"It was on its way, your honour."

"Maybe, but it need not have caught the man. It was for the police to catch him."

Nahgoo became thoughtful. How could he make the Englishman understand and see it from his own point of view?

"Sir, if the police had taken him they would have carried him away to Bombay."

"Of course, and he would have been sentenced to be hanged probably; for it was a bad case of murder.

"Then I could not have seen his punishment, your honour; and it would have been the same to me as if no punishment had been given."

"Would it have mattered? You would have been told that the punishment was given," said Hillary.

"Does not your honour know that when men kill each other it is not to make dead but to see them suffer?"

"Which is like a wild beast," said Hillary, taken aback by this strange line of argument.

"No, sir. A wild beast wants only to make dead. Did the elephant care to see Cassim run? It was these old eyes that wanted to see the bad man run. The elephant killed quickly. When it could not catch him with its feet it took him with its trunk and carried him to the water. Cassim had strength and was a strong man. He could have run a much longer time." Was there a note of regret that the end had come too soon?

"Where were you when all this was going on?"

"I sat high up on the cliff. I watched the butler as he rested below the monkeys' nests. They stole his turban, in which he had hidden the beads. The muslin was torn to pieces as the little people quarrelled over it."

"And the necklace?"

"It fell out and was carried away by the big monkey."

"So that's how you knew where to look for it. How did you get it from them?"

Nahgoo related the story and described the feeding of the little people and the drugging of the leader when it cornered him in its nest.

"So the Oodiya master is giving the father of the forest eight annas (half a rupee) a day as a reward."

Nahgoo made a gesture of assent, and then turned the palms of his hands outwards as a sign that the arrangement did not meet with his approval.

"Half a rupee a day for bringing the beads back from the monkey rocks," repeated the Inspector.

The Gipsy showed no gratification over the prospect of being pensioned and occupying the proud position of an independent man of means.

"You are not pleased?" said Hillary.

"This poor old man is troubled."

"Why should you be?"

"It will be difficult to gather eight annas worth of firewood every day. Perhaps it can be done every other day, but the bundle will be big and heavy."

"You are not required to give firewood for the money. It will be yours whether you take your usual bundle to the Oodiya kitchen or not. You will receive it at the Oodiya office window, where the estate coolies are paid."

Nahgoo was not satisfied. He made a gesture of dissent with his hands that amounted to a protest against an injustice.

"This old man must give full bundle of firewood or something else will be taken."

"What else can be taken from you but firewood?"

"Who can tell? My health, my food, my strength. Money is never given for nothing, as your honour knows."

"This is not for nothing. It is for bringing back the beads."

"They gave no trouble such as firewood gives when it has to be cut out of the jungle. After the monkey had fallen asleep it was easy to bring away the necklace."

This man of the jungle possessed a strange complexity of mind, thought Hillary, who was familiar with all forest creatures from long residence in the Western Ghauts. The Gipsy had done his best to bring sudden retribution to a criminal who would otherwise have received punishment in an orthodox way. On the other hand, he refused to take money that he did not consider that he had earned. There was no morality about it. He was afraid of being lured into some mysterious compact by which he sold something he could not spare to the Englishman.

"This poor old man will go back to his people," said Nahgoo, attempting to solve his difficulty. "It will be hard work to walk the long distances and carry a proper load."

"Who will have the Gipsy's cave if it is left empty?" asked Hillary. He was anxious to arrange this matter of a reward to the old man's liking. He had promised Don to settle it if he could.

The thought of someone appropriating the dwelling that had been his for so long was disturbing to Nahgoo.

"Sir, will your honour speak to the master of Oodiya for me? I can't leave the cave and I can't take the eight annas."

Hillary considered for a while.

"Let it be like this," he said. "Five annas for the wood——"

Nahgoo wagged his head in assent that was unqualified.

"—delivered at the kitchen door."

Another gesture of hearty assent.

"And three annas for the little people who found the beads and kept them safe. The money is to be spent by the father of the forest on food such as they have before received."

A still more vigorous wagging of the head signified complete agreement with the bargain.

"Two annas and a half to be spent for the food and half an anna to be paid to the Gipsy for bringing it from the market to the monkey valley."

"Thus shall I make friends with the new leader of the little people who is their choice," said Nahgoo with satisfaction.

Hillary recapitulated the terms.

"Mind, two annas and a half for food for the monkeys. Half an anna for carrying it. Five annas instead of four for every bundle of firewood delivered to the cook. In all, half a rupee, eight annas only."

Nahgoo replied promptly:

"By the word of the Gipsy the little people shall have their food, and the firewood shall be delivered at the door of the Oodiya kitchen as your honour has said.

THE END